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PIGEON BLOOD RUBIES

BY

H. McD. BODKIN, K.C.

AUTHOR OF
"PAUL BECK, DETECTIVE," "THE QUESTS OF PAUL BECK," "THE CAPTURE OF PAUL BECK," "HIS BROTHER'S KEEPER," "THE TEST"

LONDON
EVELEIGH NASH
1915

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PIGEON BLOOD RUBIES

CHAPTER I

SUDDEN DEATH

"My dear chap, I should have been bored to death in the place," said Alex Belton, helping himself to a devilled kidney. "Try those, they're fine."

"No you wouldn't," retorted Paul Beck, answering the first part of the sentence. "I put in three months of it and I wasn't bored in the least. It was very quiet, of course, in the heart of the country, seven miles from a railway station, no amusement but some rotten fly-fishing, and no one to talk to but a house full of deaf and dumb people and Dr. Chelmsworth."

"Deadly!"

"That's because you don't know Chelmsworth."

"What the deuce brought you there or kept you there?" Belton asked carelessly with the butter-knife pointed to spear another pat, "was there any special reason?"

Beck was on the point of telling him. The first words of the sentence were formed in his brain

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and were on the way to his lips. If they had passed his lips it is most unlikely that this story would have been written, it is certain that if it had been written the end would not have been the same. But a sudden thought captured the words before they got spoken. Dr. Chelmsworth did not want the thing spoken about, it might mean a lot of bother to him.

"I went down to see Chelmsworth; he is an old pal of mine, and is doing well with his private deaf and dumb asylum. Somehow when I got there the thing interested me and I stayed on. Chelmsworth is a most entertaining chap and knows a lot about poisons, though they are not specially in his line, and has a wonderful knack with his patients."

That was as near as he got to the truth, and the other man, who was merely talking for talking's sake, went steadily on with his breakfast.

This story takes them up about nine o'clock on a spring morning, sitting together in the breakfast-room of the Comrades' Club, popularly known as the "Pals' Home," in Piccadilly. "Love your neighbour as yourself" was the motto of the club, but neighbours were restricted to fellow-members. It was a small place, only a dozen members, but the dozen were all intimate personal friends. When a member died (he never resigned), the election for the vacancy was unanimous, the faintest hint of objection from any one member kept the candidate out.

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The club was run on socialistic lines. Every member ordered what he liked from small beer to champagne, and the total expense was each quarter shared in equal shares amongst the twelve.

It chanced that Belton and his special friend Beck had each come up to town by an early train; they had left their luggage at their respective flats, and had met for breakfast at the club. While they are finishing breakfast, and before the story begins, let a word be said about these two men who are to take so large a part in it.

Most readers dislike description. They want the pages broken up, they want dialogue, incident, and lots of adventure. But even in a sensational story, and this story is frankly sensational, it is necessary to introduce the characters. You cannot be interested in people unless you know them. Stories in which AB and XY do and are done by are dull reading. No one cares about the murder or rescue of a mere lay figure. So the impatient reader must be asked to kindly wait one moment for a personal introduction to the two young men who are just finishing a very excellent breakfast in the Comrades' Club in Piccadilly.

It is just possible he may be acquainted with Mr. Beck. In his later years this gentleman has acquired something of a cosmopolitan reputation, his portrait has appeared in the illustrated papers, stories about him, true or otherwise, have been published in several languages, he has friends and admirers in Germany, France, Sweden, Italy and

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America. But at this time he was a young solicitor, well off, and, as many people thought, clever, with a special twist for finding things out, which he had already shown on more than one occasion.

A good-looking fellow enough was Beck, but lazy and dull most people thought at first sight. A curly head and soft brown eyes like a retriever's gave that impression, but a square chin belied it. His forehead was his strong point, broad and prominent and full about the temples. For so young a man Beck looked too stout, and his shoulders were just the least bit rounded. But it was the stoutness of muscle, not fat, and people who fancied him slow and clumsy were often surprised when it was put to the test, disagreeably surprised if they pitted themselves against him.

The young stockbroker, Alex Belton, was the taller, cleaner built, and better looking of the two. No one would have thought him stupid at first sight, his pleasant face radiated alert intelligence. He was fair, but there was nothing of the pink and white about him. His complexion was ruddy and tanned by an outdoor life, his tawny hair had a spring in it and his blue eyes a glint. His good-humour was contagious, when he laughed that rollicking laugh of his he always set a whole roomful laughing with him, as the pack answers the cry of the first hound that finds.

A rare thing; Alex Belton was a woman's man and a man's man as well. All agreed that he was

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straight, that he couldn't do a mean thing if he tried, and he was always keen to do a good turn for a friend. Good at all outdoor games, a very glutton of every kind of sport and excitement, he gambled freely and with atrocious luck. At race or card-table he was almost always a loser, always the most good-humoured of losers. On the Stock Exchange, however, he was singularly successful, he seemed to have a sixth sense for rises and falls, and was generous of straight tips to his friends.

He and Beck had taken to each other from the first, and it was on Belton's proposal and on the strength of Belton's popularity that Beck had become a member of the exclusive little club where they were now having breakfast together.

"Any special news?" asked Beck, as he finished his third cup of coffee. "I scarcely ever saw a paper in the country."

Belton looked up from carefully balancing a scrap of marmalade on an inadequate morsel of toast, and thought for a minute before he answered. The marmalade toppled off the toast on to his plate.

"Of course you heard of the curious death of old Lord Tresham?"

Beck was plainly surprised. "Lord Tresham dead. No?"

"Very much yes, I'm sorry to say, dead for nearly a fortnight. A horribly sudden business, went off in the night, found dead in the morning.

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Apoplexy, the doctor made it, and the coroner's jury followed suit. The papers were full of it at the time. Wonderful how it refreshes the newspaper memory when a chap that was half forgotten pops off at last. I don't suppose the poor old chap knew or cared a d——n for their palaver. There were hints of foul play, but they came to nothing. Old Tresham himself, wherever he is, if he is anywhere, must know how he died, but he didn't tell and there was no other witness. He was the man they used to call 'The ruby king,' you know."

"Of course, I know," said Beck. "His son Peter is a great pal of mine, second or third son, third I think."

"Right. The eldest son, Philip, is my special friend. A born sportsman and gambler. Met him at all?"

"Once with his brother at the Derby, he had won a big pot and was celebrating. He had his full whack of champagne at the time."

"He would. Have you ever heard that queer story about the bet he made one time with——"

The talk threatened to degenerate into anecdotes when Beck brought it back to the point. "So Philip is Lord Tresham now? Queer chap, I wonder how he likes it."

"Hasn't had much time to make up his mind, has he? The coronet only fell in a fortnight ago."

They had risen from the table and Belton was standing with his back to the fire. It was plain

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from his face that he did not feel as lightly as he pretended, when he spoke again it was in a more serious tone.

"He was a fine chap, old Tresham, and full of life, though he was over seventy. It is a hard thing for a man to go out when he is enjoying himself. I wonder what happens afterwards. Does anything?"

But Beck had no taste for such abstruse speculations. Curiosity had got hold of him, that hint about foul play started it.

"I'd like to see what the newspapers wrote," he said, as he finished cutting and lighting a cigar.

"Curiosity killed a cat," put in his friend.

"But the dog nosed out the secret," answered Beck, laughing. When he had got his cigar well lit he nodded good-bye and passed through the writing-room to the smoking-room, which was the largest and most comfortable in the club. By a rare chance the room was empty, but a cheery fire burned in the grate and a deep armchair in rich brown morocco, that had once been red, was drawn invitingly close up to it. A round table, covered with newspapers and magazines set out in even parallel lines and as yet undisturbed by the readers, stood near the centre of the room and on a smaller table close to the wall was a file of *The Times*, the only newspaper filed in the club. In a far corner a tape machine was spitting out spasmodically, whenever it felt inclined, an endless curl and coil of white paper ribbon.

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Beck turned over the pages of *The Times* for a fortnight back. He missed what he wanted the first shot, tried again and found it.

"SUDDEN DEATH OF LORD TRESHAM."

The Times wrote in its own stolid fashion—

"We deeply regret to record the death of Launcelot William Henry Trevor, tenth Baron Tresham, who died last night at the fine old family seat, Rockhurst, in the seventy-first year of his age. He was a man of distinguished ability, and his career discounts the view too commonly held, that heredity is no guarantee for intelligence. Though he never showed any taste for public life, there is no doubt his talents would, had he so chosen, have fitted him to take a very prominent place in the service of his country. After a distinguished course at Cambridge, in which he took high honours in science, he launched out into a career of great eccentricity and extravagance, and for about ten years lived a life of strenuous pleasure, which, though it did not in the least affect a constitution of unrivalled vitality, very seriously diminished his fortune, and heavily involved the family estates. His marriage about this time was followed by a complete change in his method of life. He settled down at Rockhurst as a country squire to the careful management of his estate, but with this difference from the ordinary country squire that, like the late Lord Salisbury, he estab-

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lished a laboratory at his residence and devoted himself to chemical research for which his youth had been distinguished.

"It will be remembered that it was about this time the fashionable and scientific world was startled by the invention of a method for the manufacture of artificial rubies which could only be distinguished, even by the most skilful experts, by a very slight difference of colour which the inexpert eye was unable to detect, but which, nevertheless, made a vast difference in the price of the artificial gems as distinguished from the natural. The new process merely meant the conversion by fusion of a number of small rubies of trifling value into one large stone, and it was rumoured, with what truth it is not possible to say, that the object of Lord Tresham's research was the discovery of a more perfect process by which the true pigeon blood distinctive colour of the perfect ruby might be preserved.

"It is certain, however, that some little time after his retirement, Lord Tresham purchased large quantities of small rubies, and some time later he sold some superb stones. The experts who examined the gems, one of which was purchased for royalty, were loud in their praise of their perfect beauty, and positive and unanimous in declaring that they were all natural stones and could not possibly have been produced by artificial means. Lord Tresham, on being interviewed on the subject, refused to commit himself to any statement, and

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public opinion was much exercised as to the true explanation.

"In some quarters it was thought that Lord Tresham had become possessed of a valuable ruby mine of which he concealed the whereabouts, and another that he had discovered some lost heirlooms of his family; but the more general view appeared to be that he had discovered the process of which it was believed he was in quest, for retaining the perfect pigeon blood colour in an artificial stone.

"The result was a marked fall in the value of rubies, but not before Lord Tresham had acquired an enormous fortune, paid off the charges on the family property, and purchased large additional estates. Suddenly he ceased to deal in rubies small or large, by sale or purchase, and the beautiful gem rapidly regained its popularity and value in the fashionable and commercial world. Ever since his lordship has lived the life of a country gentleman. His laboratory was closed, and he devoted himself to the management of his estate and the education of his children. His wife, to whom he was tenderly attached, died about seven years ago, and after her death his visits to the metropolis became even less frequent than before.

"His death was quite unexpected, for as far as is known, he had never been really ill in his life. Last night, as was his custom, he sat up late in his bedroom, reading a novel by Mr. William de Morgan, a writer for whom he professed a special admiration. About one o'clock his man Gibson,

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whose duty it was to remain up after the other servants had retired, to attend to his master's requirements, entering the apartment, discovered him lying back in a heavy armchair close to the fireplace, and on examination found that life was totally extinct. The police have been communicated with, and an inquiry will be held in due course.

"Lord Tresham leaves three sons. The eldest, Philip, who now becomes eighth earl of Tresham, has long been prominently and favourably identified with the sporting institutions of the country. His second son, a famous connoisseur, believed to be one of the best amateur judges of painting in the three kingdoms, has already made a very remarkable collection. The third son, Peter, the only one of the family married, has quite recently espoused the eldest daughter of Lord Willoby, and resides, with his wife at Silverlake in Kent, on a property purchased and presented to him on his marriage by his father."

Mr. Beck was much disappointed with this stodgy rigmarole which he read impatiently, shifting from one foot to the other in front of the little table. All the preliminary facts he already knew, and he rightly guessed that an out-of-date obituary had been exhumed from some pigeon hole in *The Times'* office when the news of the death of Lord Tresham had arrived, and had been set up with a hastily written addition distributed in small "takes" amongst the compositors to be

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ready for the morning edition. It is thus that the necessary reputation for omniscience is obtained and retained by a newspaper.

But what Mr. Beck wanted to read was the particulars of the death, and he turned over a few copies further until he came to the report of the inquest. Then he shifted the file to the round table close to the fire and sat down to read it at his ease.

His eye ran carelessly down the preliminary skirmishes, the swearing of the jury and the rest of it, all of which was reported in absurd detail. John Gibson, the valet, was the first witness of any importance examined by the coroner. In the report he was described shortly as a middle-aged, respectable-looking man.

" ' Your name, if you please.'

" ' John Gibson.'

" ' You were valet to Lord Tresham? Have you been long in his service? '

" ' Over two years, I came to him from Lord Dunfraney.'

" ' Now, will you kindly tell us in your own words what you knew of this business.'

" ' It is not much.'

" ' Much or little we want to know. It was you saw him first after his death? '

" ' Yes, sir, it was I found the body. His lordship's habit was to sit up late, sometimes in the library, sometimes in his bedroom, till twelve or later. If he didn't ring for me before one—he'd

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forget sometimes—it was understood I was to come to him without ringing. The rest of the servants went to bed about eleven, I sat in my own room until I was wanted. Sometimes he'd ask me to do something, or get him something; the night before that it was mulled port, he had a cold in his throat. Often as not he would just bid me be off to bed, I must say for him——'

"'Yes, yes, that will do. Come to the night in question.'

"'Yes, sir. I thought he was asleep at first when I came into the room. It has happened before that he has fallen asleep over a book in his chair, which was as big as a bed almost, so I put my hand on his shoulder. "Wake up, my lord," I said, "it's past one o'clock." But he never moved and there was something queer in the touch of him. I had come up behind and so hadn't a good look at his face, not at first. The moment I saw it plain I knew he was dead.'

"'His lordship was lying far back in the chair, one arm across his body and the other slinging down quite straight, the fingers were doubled up on the carpet. It was such a queer start that I could not move for a minute. I just shouted, shouted for all I was worth. No one seemed to hear, the house was horribly silent. The minute I could feel my legs working under me I ran downstairs to Mr. Brandon's room, shouting all the time.'

"'Mr. Brandon is the butler, I believe?'

"'Yes, Mr. Brandon is the butler. He heard

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my first shout and was half dressed in a kind of a way when I tumbled into his room—" His lordship is dead," I said, " took off by a fit of some sort——" " My God, man, don't say that ! " shouted Mr. Brandon. Those were his very words, but he knows now it was true, he told me so afterwards. We ran back together to the room. I was for carrying him to his room, but Mr. Brandon wouldn't. " Better leave him as we found him, Gibson," that's what he said to me, " there's bound to be some inquiry into this." So we just left him and called up the rest of the servants, the housekeeper was the last. After they had all had a look at him we locked the doors, there are two doors, and Mr. Brandon telephoned the police.'

" ' Were there any signs of a struggle ? '

" ' None that I saw, sir.'

" ' Or robbery ? '

" ' His coat was open and I saw his watch all right, and the big ruby pin he wore was there, too.'

" ' Was his purse in his pocket ? ' This from a juror.

" ' I couldn't say, sir, I didn't touch him after the first.'

" ' The police will depose to that,' explained the coroner, ' I understand the purse was intact. There was nothing stolen from his room ? '

" ' Not a blessed thing, sir, that I could see. My belief, if I may make so bold, is that a fit of some kind took him.'

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" ' We won't trouble you for your belief,' said the coroner, ' that will do.' "

Mr. Beck's eye raced through the police evidence. It confirmed Gibson. There were seven pounds fifteen, gold, notes and silver, in the purse that was found in the trousers pocket. The gold fitted dressing-case and the jewellery on the dressing-table had not been meddled with. The doctor's evidence, a local practitioner named McIntyre, came last.

" He was called in the morning after the occurrence, he deposed. There were no external marks on the body. ' Oh, yes, I am quite sure of that. I made the most careful examination, there was not the slightest cut or bruise. The face was slightly discoloured and the eyeballs protruding, in every other respect the appearance was normal.'

" *A juror* (Mr. Hopper, Veterinary Surgeon): ' Wouldn't that look like strangulation, doctor? '

" *Witness:* ' Strangulation could not be caused without violence, considerable violence. His lordship was a powerfully built man, there would be bruises on the throat. There were none.'

" *Coroner:* ' Then you think it was a natural death? '

" *Witness:* ' In my opinion he died from apoplexy, followed by failure of the heart's action. There was nothing, as far as my medical judgment goes, in the appearance of the body to justify any suggestion of foul play.' "

Mr. Beck skipped the coroner's charge and read the verdict. " The jury found in accordance with

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the medical evidence." There was a brief concluding paragraph following the report of the inquest.

" Our correspondent had a brief interview to-day with the new earl who, by a happy accident, arrived yesterday quite unexpectedly. He expressed to our correspondent his entire concurrence with the verdict. To-morrow the remains will be interred in the family resting-place."

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CHAPTER II

"LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON"

MR. BECK sat staring into the fire. He wasn't satisfied, in spite of the doctor's assurance that there was not the slightest ground for the suspicion of foul play. He found a curious mystery in the whole circumstances of the case, which even the concurrence in the verdict of the new lord, who had arrived so happily and unexpectedly on the scene, failed to remove.

Anyhow, he told himself the thing was over and done for, and his lordship's body underground for nearly a fortnight, so there was no use bothering about it. Besides, it was no business of his.

He shook the whole case out of his mind, a happy knack of his, picked up his hat and umbrella which he had brought with him to the smoke-room, and walked to the door. Pausing carelessly before the tape machine he watched it spitting out in jerks and starts long coils of the very latest news as a conjuror draws ribbons from a hat.

"Hallo, Beck, what's up?" cried a member who entered at the moment. But Beck neither saw nor heard him.

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On the white ribbon slowly issuing from the mouth of the machine, in clear black type, were the words—

"SUDDEN DEATH OF LORD TRESHAM AT HIS RESIDENCE, ROCKHURST. BODY DISCOVERED THIS MORNING."

The club man, Evans was his name, looked naturally enough from Beck to the tape. He was a pleasant-faced man of about forty, with smooth, pure white hair that gave him a distinguished appearance.

"Hallo," he cried again, "that is pretty stale news. The man has been dead nearly a fortnight."

"Nonsense," cried Beck, turning round sharply. "Morning, Evans, only came up to town this morning. You are looking first class. Why, man, don't you see that it's the son the tape is talking about—Philip, the man who has just come into the title? That's what makes it so queer."

"By Jove, it is a rum go!" agreed Evans, "two in a fortnight, if you are right in saying it's the son."

"Of course I am right. But we will make sure pretty soon, the evening papers will be full of the thing."

The evening papers were full of it.

This story does not vouch for whether Evans ever gave the matter another thought. It doesn't even know what became of Evans, having to keep

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its eye on quite a lot of other people. Evans only slipped on the stage for a second, a walking gentleman, and retired.

But to Beck the matter was of absorbing interest, just when he was vaguely wondering if the heir, Philip, Lord Tresham, might in any way be responsible for the death of his father there leaped to his eyes the unexpected news that Philip himself was dead.

With quite a pile of evening papers at his elbow he sat that afternoon in his own cosy sitting-room after an early luncheon, smoking, reading and thinking.

The room was not in the least like the den of a private detective. It was tidy and very comfortable without even a touch of Bohemianism to redeem it from the commonplace. The books, and there were a lot of them, were good editions of the best novels, old and new, especially old, with a slight sprinkling of the poets. On a hanging shelf in one corner by itself was a small but select library of about twenty volumes on physical science, electricity, chemistry and bacteriology. A number of coloured engravings in dainty black and gold frames were on the walls. The St. James and St. Giles beauties, "Black Monday," "The Fortune Teller" and others which Mr. Beck had picked up for a song. The carpet was thick, and the fire burned brightly behind a bright brass fender. All the chairs in the room were made for comfort, and Mr. Beck was in the most comfortable

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of the lot, a round, deep, low leather chair that held him snugly round the back.

Mr. Beck might have spared the pile of pennies that the papers had cost him. They were all in the same cry with no material difference between them. Each had three or four scare headings, but "EXTRAORDINARY COINCIDENCE" was common to them all.

For once in a way the scare headings seemed justified. Launcelot, the seventh earl, had been found dead at night in his chair in the bedroom, Philip, the eighth earl, was found dead in his bed in the morning. That was the only difference, all the other details were precisely the same. Both bodies had been discovered by the valet, Gibson, whom Philip had retained after his father's death.

The man was described in the newspapers as being stunned by the second tragedy, following so soon on the first. In both cases the appearance of the dead man's face was the same. There was no mark of violence and there was nothing to suggest robbery.

Of course, the papers puzzled over it in their own clear-sighted way. One suggested that it was a clear case of heredity, remarkable only in the fact that the son's death followed so quickly on the father's. Another hinted that the elder Lord Tresham, who had led a wild and adventurous life, might have provoked some deadly enmity which had extended to the son. In the third there was a delicately veiled insinuation that the two deaths,

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however caused, were a stroke of luck for the next heir.

Mr. Beck was puzzled. None of those suggestions satisfied him. He could not even make up his mind off-hand whether death had been natural or violent, though he strongly inclined to the notion of foul play.

" No affair of mine, anyway," he said, as he sat up to knock the ashes out of his pipe on the fender and mix himself a small drink.

At that moment a knock came to the door, a knock that he knew, as he knew the knocks of all his familiars, and a moment after the Hon. Peter Trevor came hurriedly into the room, followed by Alex Belton.

Just one moment, if the reader pleases, for the introduction of the Hon. Peter. He gives one the impression of a man of about twenty-five, slim, but strong, and very active, with rather a long face (" Colt " was his nickname at Eton), broad at the brows and narrow at the chin. Curly brown hair, eager blue eyes, and a most insinuating smile complete the picture.

But he is not smiling now. Few men ever saw good-natured, good-humoured Peter Trevor so disturbed. There is just one other thing that should be mentioned about him. The hand he offers to Beck is large and sinewy, but the finger nails are perfect, long filbert-shaped, with white half-moons at the base, that a fashionable lady would give her diamond dog-collar for.

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"Hallo, Peter," Beck cried as he took his friend's hand and nodded over his shoulder to Belton, whom he had seen before, "what is the worst news with you? You look as if it were pretty bad."

"I see you have got the papers there," Peter said slowly. He always spoke slowly and stammered a little if he tried to put on speed in an emergency.

"Of course, of course, I forgot for the moment that he was your brother. It is a very sad business, coming hot foot after your father's death. But you didn't see so much of each other of late, did you?"

"It is not altogether that," said Peter, "though, of course, I'm sorry for the poor chap, deuced sorry." It was curious to note how he strove to get the words out fast and how they stuck in spite of him. After a minute he gave up the attempt and settled down to his own pace. "Do you think there has been foul play, Beck?"

"I can't say, I'm sure. It looks rather like it, I'm afraid."

"Not the least bit in the world, if you ask me," volunteered Belton.

"Think so, Belton?" said Beck, taking him at once into council. "You'd be about as cute a judge as any one I know. Mix yourself a drink, the cigars are behind you."

"I prefer a pipe," said Belton, taking a pipe-case from his pocket. "Cigars when I can't get a pipe, cigarettes when I can't get a cigar."

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"You'll have a cigar, Peter? Say when. Nonsense man, a good stiff drink is what you want, or I'm no judge. Now we can talk the thing over comfortably," Beck went on. "Why do you think it is all right, Belton?"

"Why shouldn't I think it? Two men die suddenly, father and son. That's what it amounts to, after all."

"But, my dear fellow," Peter began deliberately.

"Easy for one moment," Belton cut in. "You are going to say the symptoms are the same. Do father and son never die of the same disease? Of course, the old josser of a doctor, McIntyre, didn't know what to call it. Something wrong with the heart, or kidneys, or liver, I suppose. Why should you suspect foul play when there are no marks, no robbery and no motive? Aren't those the things a detective always looks for, Beck?"

"That's so," said Beck.

"There's something more than that in it," Peter Trevor began again and stopped for a second. "You were a great friend of poor Philip's, Alex?"

"Well, yes, we were always good pals, though I didn't see as much of him as I'd have liked."

"Did he ever tell you any secrets?"

"Secrets?"

"Anything about the governor and his ruby-making?"

"What the deuce are you driving at, Peter?"

"Did he? Can't you answer a plain question?"

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"Not a word."

"I wish he had; I made sure he had; something he said to me made me think so. Now I am puzzled if I ought to tell you chaps myself, and I don't see why I shouldn't. Of course, this is between ourselves."

"Of course," said Beck and Belton together.

"It was all true what the papers have been saying," announced Peter.

"The papers have been saying quite a lot of things," objected Beck.

"I mean that the governor did find out how to make rubies, the real pigeon-blood variety. When he stopped making them, not to spoil the market, he hid the chemical formula. It was quite a simple process, he said, any one could work it. Of course, you'll understand there's more money in the thing than can be counted. Well, only two men now living know where the parchment is hidden, and I am one of the two."

"My dear fellow," cried Belton, "what in heaven's name has that to do with the death of your brother and father?"

"The governor knew and Philip knew," Peter continued steadily. "Now, Arthur and I are the only two left. It was this way. The governor told us all about the parchment, and he pledged us on oath to keep the hiding-place a secret. Each was to tell his eldest son when he came of age, and in that way the secret would be kept safe in the family. Don't you see, Belton? Don't you see,

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Beck? If Arthur and I were wiped out the secret would be lost for ever."

"Who could have known about it?" asked Beck. "You say you never told?"

"Not before this, but any one of the others might have told. There was no oath about that, only about where it was hidden. I thought Philip had told Belton."

"How could it help any one to murder them?" Beck objected. "It is as well to speak plainly, murder is what is in your head. If they could get hold of the secret that would be another pair of boots."

"I fancy I see light there," put in Belton quietly. He got up and filled himself out another drink before he went on slowly as Peter himself, as if he hadn't got the thing clear in his mind and was thinking it out while he spoke. "Mightn't the people who have rubies take an interest in the secret? If that paper were found it would surely put them out of play."

"That's a bit far-fetched, I'm afraid,"—this from Beck. "Still, there may be something in it. But if that is the explanation, why wasn't the whole family wiped out right away at one fell swoop?"

"One at a time," suggested Peter, "slow and sure. It is my turn soon."

"It may be all a false alarm," retorted Beck, cheerfully. "I'm not so dead set on my own opinion of foul play. It may be just a coincidence, after all."

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"That's just it," said Peter. "That's why I came to you. If we could make sure that Philip died a natural death it would about settle the question. I want you to come down with me to-night to Rockhurst. Will you?"

"Of course I'll come if you think I could be of any use, but a doctor would be more to the purpose."

"Oh, we'll have a doctor as well, if you like, but it's you I want."

"You come too, Alex," suggested Beck. "I wish you would."

"I'd be very glad to have you," added Peter, who had not asked him before.

"And I'd be very glad to lend a hand if I could, to clear the thing up. I'm coming round to Beck's view, that poor Philip was murdered, and I should dearly like to lay my hand on his murderer."

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CHAPTER III

A DISCOVERY

It was near midnight, and a full moon was shining, which made the trees look black, and the ground a queer bluish white, when the motor swept up the long curves of the avenue and came round in a half circle on the wide sweep fronting the portico of Rockhurst, one of the most beautiful country seats in the beautiful county of Kent, built in the days of Elizabeth, when architects knew how to build for noblemen.

Somewhat stiff from their long drive, the four men extracted themselves from the heavy rugs, and tramped a trifle unsteadily up the broad stone steps.

"Well, Brandon," said Peter when the massive hall door swung open, and showed the old white-haired butler standing in the great hall under the electric light.

"You're welcome, Mr. Peter. This is a sore trouble, sir. His lordship will be glad you have come."

"His lordship!" cried Peter in blank surprise. "Why, I thought——"

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But Beck, whose eyes were fixed on the butler's face, interposed. "He means the new lord. Those old chaps never forget the title."

"Is my brother Arthur here?" asked Peter sharply.

"His lordship arrived this morning, sir, and I showed him your wire. He has not gone to bed yet."

"Tell him I've come and brought three friends with me, Brandon. Get some one to show them their rooms, and let us have some supper as soon as you can, like a good fellow."

A servant crossed the marble paved hall at the moment, and the butler called out: "Gibson, show these gentlemen their rooms."

A man in livery came towards them; all four looked at him curiously. Gibson was the very model of a gentleman's body-servant, a perfect machine, with all the humanity trained out of him. Clean-shaven, stolid, neither tall nor short, fat nor thin light tread, eyes slightly protuberant and fishy, face wholly emotionless. He was paler than he should be, and his thin lips twitched now and then, but the succession of shocks to which he had been subjected accounted sufficiently for that.

They followed his noiseless tread on the pathway of crimson velvet pile in the centre of the broad white staircase, that ran up on either side of the hall to the corridors, on which the bedrooms were ranged.

"Which was his room, the room where he was

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found?" asked Peter, and the valet's lips twitched as he answered—

"It is just at the end of this corridor, sir. He chose it for the view over the lake."

"They have locked the door, I suppose?" asked Mr. Beck. He stopped short, and the rest stopped with him while he asked the question.

"Yes, sir. His lordship has the key. No one has been in the room but the doctor and his lordship. The inquest is fixed for twelve o'clock to-morrow."

There was a nervousness about the man's voice that belied the stolid face and figure. The machine had been so badly shaken it was out of gear.

Half an hour later, the butler led the party through the wide dining-hall with its great carved mantelpiece, the finest piece of oak carving in all England, to a smaller inner room brilliantly lit, where they found the new lord, whom death had just raised to the peerage, awaiting them.

His lordship had his back to the door, and his eyes were intent on a glowing sunset of Turner's, which seemed to radiate light and colour through the room. He turned as they entered, and showed a long handsome face with a soft brown beard, and brown eyes wonderfully luminous. A tall man, with a wide stretch of chest, he might have been an athlete, but the pose of the figure and the slight stoop of the broad shoulders spoke unmistakably of a sedentary life.

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Roused suddenly from his intense preoccupation in the Turner, there was a slightly dazed expression in his face as he turned to welcome his guests, but it merged at once into a smile of charming courtesy.

"This is a horrible business, Peter," he said, shaking his brother's hand cordially. "I'm awfully glad you've come. I needn't say that any friends of yours are most welcome."

"This is Mr. Latimer," said Peter, introducing the famous surgeon. "This is Belton, Alex Belton; you may have heard of him from poor Philip, they were tremendous pals. Beck I know you know."

"I think I have met Mr. Belton too, Philip often spoke of him. Of Mr. Latimer, of course, every one has heard. You are all very welcome. It was horribly dreary to be alone here. You have had a dreadful long drive and must be famished."

The supper was perfect in its way. Devilled turkey bones and Spanish ham, fried as crisp as a biscuit, and some wonderful sparkling Johannesburg. All five had hearty appetites. In the course of the conversation, it turned out that the new Lord Tresham had in the afternoon strolled into the picture gallery, which contained portraits by Vandyke, Reynolds and Romney, and had forgotten about his dinner. Even now, his attention frequently wandered from the food and drink to the Turner, which absorbed his attention.

The talk, as was natural, centred on the dead

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man lying in the room upstairs, whose sudden death four of the five had come down to investigate.

"You really know more about it than I do," said Lord Tresham, "though I'm first on the spot. You have seen the papers, I haven't. I heard in London that Lord Twickham was thinking of selling his Rembrandt, one of the best in the world, to an American millionaire, of course. Victor wants the money to buy a big black pearl, which he has been hunting all over the continent. Fancy selling a Rembrandt for a thing like that! And such a Rembrandt! The man must be mad. The moment I heard of it I came straight down to stop him. He was away in Paris, but the story was true. The man is mad, of course. I came on here from Twickham's on the off chance that Philip would lend me the money to buy it, I could not quite make up the price myself at the moment. You may fancy the shock it was to hear that Philip had been found dead a few hours before, and that I was Lord Tresham. It was about the ugliest jar I ever had. Though Philip, poor fellow, and I did not hit it off very well, still, the thing was so sudden, so——"

He sipped his wine thoughtfully without finishing the sentence, and unconsciously his eyes stole back to the Turner.

"You have no suspicion of foul play?" asked his brother, and his lordship, after a second's pause roused himself to answer.

"Not the faintest. Dr. McIntyre examined the body very carefully just after I came. There

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was not the slightest sign of violence of any kind, there was nothing in the room to suggest violence. McIntyre has certified death from failure of the heart's action; he does not think it necessary to have a post-mortem. I'm glad, I must confess; I hate post-mortems. The inquest will be a mere formality."

"I don't agree," Peter blurted out before he could stop himself, then he added more slowly: "It's a queer business any way you look at it. I'd like Beck here and Mr. Latimer and Belton to have a look at the body, if you don't mind."

"Why, certainly," said his lordship. "To-night?"

Peter looked inquiringly at Beck.

"It's a bit late," Beck said; "besides, daylight is best if there is anything to see."

"Then perhaps we had better get to bed," suggested his lordship, "as no one seems to want any more wine."

He stood courteously at the door till his guests had passed out, and his last lingering look as he left the room was at the Turner.

"Still nervous, old man?" asked Belton of Peter, as they went up the broad stairs to their bedrooms.

"Oh, I don't mind Arthur's opinion one bit, if that's what you mean. He is so wrapped up in pictures he can think of nothing else. Did you notice him at supper? He'd sooner look at a sunset by Turner, than one by God Almighty.

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That's not chaff, it's sober truth; he as good as told me so."

On their way they met the valet Gibson coming from the direction of the dead man's room. He looked sleepy.

"At what hour, gentlemen, would you like to be called to-morrow?" he asked.

"Poor devil," said Peter when they had passed, "he looks completely fagged out. No wonder, he has had a rotten time of it. I hope he will have a good sleep to-morrow night."

He could not guess in what a strange and very startling way his idle kindly wish was to be granted.

The blinds were up. The pure morning sunshine searched every corner of the room. It flooded with pitiless light the broad four-poster bed where the corpse lay rigid, outlined under the coverlet, the strong face ashen grey with dark bluish shadow on the shaven cheeks and chin.

Beck and Peter, close to the bed, peered into the face of the dead man as if they might read there the secret of his death. Belton and Latimer stood a little apart, his lordship had not yet put in an appearance.

"Those two chaps are so solemn," said Belton to the surgeon, in a whisper as if he were in church, "they almost convince me in spite of myself that there is something wrong, though if there is I don't know how the deuce they are going to find it out."

Latimer without answering moved to the bed,

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and with professional nonchalance threw off the coverlet, lifted the long white robe and left the corpse stark naked. The other three men shuddered as at a desecration.

Leaning a little forward with one hand on the bed, the surgeon examined the body closely for some minutes.

"Well?" asked Peter when he looked up.

"I don't see the smallest sign of violence," he said. "The hands and feet are a little swollen, but it would be absurd to think that could contribute in any way to his death."

Beck said nothing. He walked restlessly about the room, with eyes for everything. One of the long towels on the towel-rail was rumpled as if it had been tied in a knot. Beck took it up and examined it closely, while the others watched in silent curiosity.

"One thing is certain," he said at last. "If there was foul play the man was taken by surprise and gagged and bound. He was a strong man; there is no sign of resistance. That bell-push at the right-hand side of the bed rings an alarm all over the house; the old butler told me it was put in since your father's death, Peter. You said something about swelled hands and feet, didn't you, doctor? Would that come from a tight tying?"

"There is no mark of tying on wrists or ankles."

"There wouldn't be, you know, if he were tied with something soft—a handkerchief, or a towel. Was he tied?—that's the first question."

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The doctor examined the feet and hands again with great care. He was a long time over the hands.

"I believe you are right, Mr. Beck," he said almost reluctantly, "though I should never have thought of it myself. The hands are decidedly swollen, and there is a bluish tinge at the finger-tips, as if the blood was driven to the extremities and never flowed back. Just what I would expect if the wrists were tied tight and the man died, or was killed while they were tied. The blood couldn't circulate after death, of course."

"Let us take it at that for a moment," said Beck. "If the man was tied he was gagged—not regularly gagged, I should think, that would leave plain signs; probably a towel was tied tight round the mouth. Could that leave any mark, doctor, that you could detect?"

"I'll try," said Mr. Latimer, and the other men shivered as he drew the lips back from the tight clenched teeth, and coolly examined the inner surface.

"Here," he said, "is an abrasion of the skin that would be caused by the lip being pressed hard against the sharp edge of a tooth. It seems to be quite recent."

"We're getting on," said Beck.

"I was sure from the first he was murdered," broke in Peter.

"But there is no sign of violence," Latimer answered, puzzled and petulant at being forced

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from his first view. "A man doesn't die from having his hands and feet tied."

"Or his lip cut," added Belton.

"If the man was tied and gagged," said Beck, "the chances are a hundred to one he was murdered as well. He wasn't poisoned, that's pretty clear, no need to gag him for that. There must be some vital injury somewhere, brain or heart I should say, doctor."

The doctor nodded. "Or the spinal marrow," he said, "that is at the tail of the brain."

"Harder to get at than the heart?" Beck asked, and again the doctor nodded assent.

"Then most likely it's the heart. Will you have another good look?"

Again the doctor threw back the long white robe with which the corpse was clad, and left the chest bare. The other three men shrank from touching the dead body, but they went forward eagerly to watch—Beck the quietest of them all.

On the broad chest there was a mat of black hair, short and curly like the hair of an animal. Very slowly, very carefully, the doctor put the hair aside, and the white flesh showed here and there under the tip of his long delicate finger as he moved it about over the region of the heart. Suddenly he drew a quick breath with a queer sucking sound, and the men behind him stooped nearer, their heads close together and peered eagerly.

On the small spot of white skin from which the hair was put aside, there was a little red dot

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like the fresh bite of a mosquito; no bigger. All five stared at it for a moment, then the doctor straightened his bent head with a gesture which told that he had seen enough.

"Again you are right, Mr. Beck," he said; "the mark is quite plain, a punctured wound made with a fine-pointed instrument, a long steel hatpin would do it, driven straight through the heart."

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CHAPTER IV

SUICIDE OR MURDER

"DEATH was instantaneous," added the doctor.

"But why in that queer way?" asked Belton. "Why tie the man up to kill him?"

"If he had struggled the hatpin would have broken," returned the doctor, "they must have pushed it in steadily."

"I fancy there was more in it than that," interposed Beck, speaking very slowly as if he were spelling out an illegible scrawl. "They might have killed him half a dozen ways more easily—shot him, stabbed him, strangled him. They pushed that hatpin slowly into the flesh, torturing the man. Why did they do it?"

He stopped short as he caught Peter's eye. Peter, too, had guessed the reason, the man was tortured to wring from him the secret of the rubies.

"The thing now is to catch the devil who did it," broke in the practical Belton. "Hell is not hot enough nor eternity long enough to punish the d——d scoundrel."

"There was more than one man on the job,"

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said Beck, "probably three or four. But I think I know one of them, at any rate."

"Who?" asked Alex and Peter at the same moment. The doctor looked his curiosity but did not speak.

Beck walked across the room and examined the windows, and after fastening them securely he went to the door, tried the lock and turned the key before he answered.

"Gibson," he said in a low voice. "I learned to-day that Lord Tresham, I mean the last Lord Tresham, locked his door at night. Gibson brought him a cup of chocolate at seven every morning, he had a duplicate key. He must have let the others in. I don't suppose for a moment he was the principal, but he was certainly one of the gang."

"What are you going to do about it?" asked Alex, "arrest him at once?"

"Watch him for a while. I doubt if there is evidence enough to convict; besides, I want to get at the others."

"I think you are right," assented Peter; "if Gibson is in it he is a mere underling."

"I agree," said Alex. "Beck is quite right. We will all keep an eye on Gibson, he cannot escape us."

But the event proved that for once Beck was quite wrong. The doctor had gone back to his breakfast, leaving the room where the corpse lay, Peter to the smoking-room on the ground floor, and Lord Tresham had carried off Belton to see

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the picture gallery, which was at the right wing of the house, and to share his delight in its treasures, when Beck after a long examination came out of the room in the nick of time to see the close of a startling tragedy.

From the end of the corridor where he stood he had a full view of the broad landing from which two rows of stairs ran down to the great hall. On that landing, near the farther staircase, the valet Gibson was staggering as if in the last stage of drunkenness. But the man was not drunk. He reeled back against the broad banisters which he gripped with his left hand, and with his right drew a little white-handled knife from his neck.

Beck saw the quick gush of blood that followed, and shouted as he rushed down the corridor just in time to catch the dying man in his arms.

The blood was warm on Beck's hands as he laid him down gently on the carpet; at the same moment Belton, with Peter following close on his heels, came running up the stairs. All three bent over the dying man, whose face seemed contorted with rage. Twice he tried to speak, but with each effort the blood gushed from the gash in his throat, and his lips failed to utter a word. He half raised himself and motioned wildly with his hand, then his whole body was shaken with a violent convulsion and he collapsed on the carpet, limp and dead.

"His secret has died with him," said Peter.

"We'll find it yet," said Belton.

'Was this murder or suicide?" questioned Beck

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in a whisper, speaking rather to himself than to the others.

The knife had dropped from the dead hand and lay on the carpet, both heft and blade clammy with blood. There was nothing distinctive about it, a sharp-pointed, ivory-handled fowl-carver which the man himself or any inmate of the house could have easily got from the pantry.

"Killed by his accomplices," hazarded Peter.

"Suicide if you ask me," said Alex. "The chap guessed he was suspected and cleared out."

"How could he guess it?" asked Peter.

"How could an accomplice guess it, if you come to that?" said Beck; "and where is the accomplice, anyway? Did you two come up the same side of the stairs?"

"Almost together," assented Alex.

"Then the murderer might have got off down the other."

"'Pon my soul," exclaimed Belton, "I believe Peter was right after all. There was a murderer. I was almost sure after Beck shouted I heard a quick step in the hall. I thought at the moment it was one of you chaps."

"We must catch him," shouted Peter; "he can't escape in that direction," and he raced down the stairs with the others at his heels. "To the right," shouted Alex, "the footsteps went to the right!" Across the hall they went full speed and turned to the right down a long dark passage with a glass door standing open at the end of it. From

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the door a wide expanse of smooth green sod, patched with flower-beds of all shapes and sizes, lay sleeping placidly in the sunshine. There was hardly cover enough to hide a mouse. Peter's eager eyes searched in vain for a glimpse of the fugitive. In all the wide space no living thing stirred.

Nor could Beck find a trace on the sod.

"No one has passed this morning," Beck said, "the dew is still on the grass."

"There was no other way a man could pass," persisted Peter; "it must have been suicide after all."

"I don't believe it," retorted Beck sharply; "it is all part of the same infernal mystery. I swear I'll get to the bottom of it if I have to spend half my life at the job."

"I'm with you, Paul, to the death," cried Alex excitedly. "Here's my hand on it," and they grasped hands. Peter regarded them gloomily for a moment.

"I'm afraid, Beck, those chaps will get me before you catch them," he said at last.

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CHAPTER V

AGAIN

For nearly six months nothing happened. The terrible secret of the last Lord Tresham's death, and in all probability of the death of his father as well was not disclosed at the inquest.

"Let the gang imagine they have kept their secret," advised Alex Belton, "there is nothing to be gained by warning them," and the other two found the advice good.

So the jury found that Lord Tresham had died of heart failure, and that Gibson committed suicide while temporarily insane. There being no mystery to keep it alive, the triple tragedy gradually faded from the remembrance of the public.

For nearly six months Beck concentrated his entire thought and energy on the inquiry without getting one inch nearer to the light. Gibson's death seemed to have blocked the only avenue to discovery. Tracing the man's life back through various situations, he found that twice at least in the last ten years there had been daring and successful burglaries in the houses in which he was engaged as footman and valet. But though

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this confirmed almost to a certainty Beck's suspicion that he was an accomplice of the murderers, and had been put out of the way by some of the gang the moment he was suspected, it did not carry him much further. How they had guessed that he was suspected, and how they had contrived to murder him safely, almost before the eyes of five witnesses, was still an unsolved puzzle.

Belton, who was working up a clue on his own account, met Beck one morning at the club, utterly discouraged.

"It is no go, old man," he said as the two sat at lunch. "You are as clever as they make them, I know that, but these chaps are too many for us both."

"I fancy I know the gang, at least I know their handiwork," Beck answered. "There have been a lot of burglaries lately, and I'm pretty sure that a servant in the house had a hand in each of them, though there was no proof, no suspicion even. But in every case except one there had been a new servant come in just before the burglary. It's a clever notion, getting in highly respectable butlers and footmen with the best references—genuine, too, mind you—from places they'd been in before. Gibson was a man of that kind, you bet."

"Couldn't you get hold of one of these chaps and squeeze him?"

"I'm afraid not. I tried and it was no go. I did get into chat with one of them as a footman

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out of place, and we were great pals, but when I hinted about the burglary he shut up like an oyster. Those chaps are well paid, no doubt, and well frightened. Gibson's death must have been an eye-opener to some of them."

"Then you give in?"

"Not a bit of it. When the gang get to work again I may catch them out."

"You can count on me right through, whenever and wherever you want me. But I rather fancy the game is played out."

Beck finished his glass of hock with a gulp, and opened his lips to answer, when a boy in buttons set a silver salver with a telegram on it under his nose.

He jumped to his feet when he had read it, as if struck through by an electric shock. A cry of anger broke from him. Never before had Alex seen the imperturbable Beck so moved.

"Read that," he said in a low hoarse voice, he could scarcely get the words out, and he held out the square of pink paper to his friend.

"Lord Tresham murdered. Peter arrested. For God's sake come at once.

"Caroline Trevor, Grosvenor Square."

"The gang again," Belton gasped out. Beck nodded, he had got back his self-control as quickly as he had lost it. Perhaps he affected to be cooler than he was.

"I'm off," he said briskly. "See you later on."

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A motor whirled him off to Grosvenor Square. There was a strange stunned expression on the face of the footman who opened the door. With his master's arrest for murder, the man's whole social world had tumbled heavily about his ears. He moved and spoke as one oppressed by a monstrous nightmare.

"Yes, sir, the mistress will see you," he babbled. "She said you was to go to her at once. It is an awful thing, Mr. Beck, to have happened in any family, more especially when you come to think that——"

A door opened softly and a pale face showed at the opening, chilling the babbler into silence like the sight of a ghost.

"Oh, I am so glad," she cried, as Beck came quickly into the room and the door closed behind him, leaving them alone; "oh, I'm so glad you came!"

Caroline, Peter Trevor's wife, was one of those women who was called "queenly" as a compliment to queens. Beck had seen her dominate a drawing-room by her stately presence and splendid beauty, dark hair, dark eyes and the rich complexion of a Spaniard. Now he saw a miserable-looking woman, trembling so violently that she could hardly stand. Her big eyes were dry and burning, but there were signs of recent tears on her pale cheeks. Long restless fingers clasped and unclasped convulsively while she spoke.

"Isn't it awful?" she said in a whisper. "I

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can't believe it even yet, though I know it's true. My head aches and it hurts me to think of it. But you'll help me, I know you'll help me."

Beck made her sit down in an easy-chair. She almost dropped into it, she was so exhausted. But there was courage and hope in that quiet steady face, and those honest dog's eyes of his, into which she looked with a piteous confidence that moved him strangely.

"Pull yourself together," he said, "for Peter's sake; that's the way to help him. Tell me as well as you can what has happened."

"It is all in a jumble in my mind, it seems to have happened a hundred years ago. He went out last night in the motor at eight o'clock, or a little before eight, to dine at Haviland's—you know Mr. Haviland—and he promised not to be late, twelve at the outside. I went to bed at about eleven. I thought I would keep awake till he came, but I dropped off to sleep almost at once.

"I awoke suddenly, wide awake, in a great fright, and put my hand out for him, but he was not there. The little repeater watch he gave me was under my pillow. I pressed it and it struck twice; two in the morning, and he had not come. Horribly frightened, I jumped out of bed and began dressing myself, with the lights full on. I stopped to listen to the whirr of a motor in the street, hoping it might be he, but it went by. I knew that something terrible had happened, but I never guessed how terrible.

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"When I had got some clothes on I looked at the clock, it was a quarter past two. I could have sworn hours had gone by. Then, almost at once, there was again the whirr of a motor. This time it stopped before the door, and feet came up the steps. Peter's own knock banged out of the silence.

"Almost before I had time to be glad I heard a kind of rush up the steps and the sound of a struggle, and Peter's voice loud and angry. I flung up the window to listen, and all was quiet again, the struggle was over. After a minute a strange voice said: 'We must do our duty, sir, it is no fault of ours.' And Peter's voice answered, it sounded so queer I hardly knew it: 'You will let me see my wife before I go with you, only for a moment. I must see her.' 'All right, sir,' said the strange voice again, 'I don't see any harm in that. But it is my duty to caution you that anything you say may be used in evidence against you."

"Half dressed as I was, I ran down to the hall, and when the second knock came I opened the door myself. There was Peter and three other men. Two of them were big and quiet, and the third, who stood a little back from the others, had a face like a rat. Peter was holding his hands in a queer way straight down in front of him, half hidden by his coat, and in a moment I saw the handcuffs.

"'Oh, my God,' I cried, 'what's the matter?'

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"'Have courage, Caroline,' he said; 'don't give way like that. It will all come right in the end.'

"'What's the matter? what's the matter?' I insisted. 'Is he murdered? Is Arthur murdered?'

"I don't know why I said that, how I guessed it at the moment.

"'Stabbed through the heart, darling,' he answered.

"At this I saw the rat-faced man steal a little notebook from his pocket, and jot down something with a pencil. But the other man, the biggest of the three, said, 'I cautioned you, sir, I cautioned you.'

"Then Peter burst out in a rage. 'I don't care a d——n, I'm telling the truth, man; the truth cannot hurt. All the same, Inspector,' he added, as he cooled down, 'I know you mean well and I'm much obliged to you. Now, don't you fret, Caroline, it must come all right in no time. Send a wire as soon as ever you can manage it to Beck, he will know what is best to be done.'

"They took him off in his own motor, the three of them, and I got the wire off as soon as I could. Oh, I've had an awful time, I thought you would never come."

"The wire must have missed me. I only came up to town last night, and I stayed on at the club. Take Peter's advice and don't fret—well, fret as little as you can help. It is very hard on you, but

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there is no danger, there can't be. This is the old gang with some new devilment. Please God we'll catch them out this time."

"Do you think he is in danger?"

"No, honestly I don't. There is no harder job going than to convict an innocent man. In a month at latest we will have him out again."

The dazed look left her eyes, hope began to kindle there, then all of a sudden the relief of tears came. She covered her face with her hands, and her sobs were loud in the big empty room. Beck waited patiently till the fit passed off, patting her shoulder soothingly as one would a crying child. After a few moments she looked up, smiling pitifully, the tears still wet in her eyes.

"Don't you wait," she said. "I'm all right now. I won't break down again, I promise. Never mind me, but go and do whatever you have to do. You'll let me know the moment you have news?"

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CHAPTER VI

A TRAP

As quick as a taxi could take him, Beck was off to Scotland Yard and sent in his card to his friend Inspector Morrison. He thought he recognised the big kindly Inspector who had twice cautioned the prisoner, and he proved right in his guess. Inspector Morrison was in charge of the case, and saw him at once in his private room.

"A bad business, Mr. Beck," he said, standing with his back to the fire, a frown on his good-humoured face. "Take a chair, won't you, sir? Of course I know what you've come about. He's a friend of yours. Well, it's as clear a case as ever I came across, the evidence is as plain as a pike-staff, and yet he didn't behave like a guilty man when we caught him. I've seen a lot of them in my time and I ought to know. But there is no getting over the evidence."

"What is the evidence, Morrison, can you tell me?"

"Better wait a bit, sir; I don't think it would be quite regular, and, besides, I don't know the whole rights of the case myself. I'd strain a point for

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you, as you know, Mr. Beck; I don't forget you've helped me at more than one crooked corner. But what good would it do? We have managed to keep the thing out of the paper, but he will be up before the magistrates to-morrow, and you will hear the whole story so far as it goes. Then you can have a look at the witnesses as well. I know how keen you are on that."

"It is half a day lost," objected Beck. "His wife is mad with impatience."

"I pity the poor lady, I do indeed, but it cannot be helped."

"I might see the prisoner and get his story from himself. I will get Lewin to take up the case with me and we can see him together, that's quite regular. Meanwhile I can tell his wife that an honest, kind-hearted man is in charge, and that no tricks will be played. Good-bye, Inspector, and thanks."

It was late in the evening before Beck contrived to get admission to the prisoner's cell, bringing with him Mr. Lewin, whom he had engaged for the defence.

Peter was sitting quite motionless on the single wooden chair the room contained, his elbows on his knees, his chin on his hands, gazing moodily at the half-moon of grated window high up in the wall opposite. He jumped to his feet when he saw Beck and wrung his hand heartily.

"I knew you would come," he cried. "Glad

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to see you too, Mr. Lewin, very glad. I suppose Beck has told you all about the case?"

"All I knew," interposed Beck, "which is not very much. We have come to you for further information."

"Just as much and just as little as you like," said Mr. Lewin, who had a large experience of criminal cases, and whose clients were not always innocent. "If you desire to speak with Mr. Beck alone I shall quite understand. I need not say that the confidence between the client and solicitor is sacred as the confessional."

"I shouldn't care if all London were to hear what I've got to say," interrupted Peter a little impatiently; "the more the better. The truth cannot hurt any one."

Mr. Lewin shrugged his stout shoulders tolerantly. He was by no means such a wholehearted believer in the virtue of truth. Peter went on addressing himself especially to Beck.

"My wife told you I had arranged to dine at Haviland's. When I got home the motor was at the door, lamps lit and all ready, and between half-past seven and eight o'clock, nearer to half-past seven I think, I stepped in."

"Did you have a good look at the driver?" asked Beck.

"Not particularly. I knew the figure of him on the box, and I knew the coat he was wearing. Of course I hadn't the faintest suspicion at the time.

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I didn't even speak to him, as he knew beforehand where we were going.

"You have been behind Braddock, and you know he is an out-and-out good driver, no better in London. The way we got through the traffic was a caution, and when we came on a clear road he just let her rip. After a little bit I paid no attention, and when I looked out I saw we had just passed the turn down to Haviland's, where I was to dine. Naturally I thought it was a mistake, I put my head out of the window and shouted to Braddock, but he just tooted the horn to drown my voice, and went ahead like blue blazes.

"It was a regular mad drive, the car simply flew, I didn't think she had it in her. The white road slipped from under us, and the telegraph posts went by as close together as the railings of the park.

"Luckily the road was pretty clear. Half a dozen times we met people, and I yelled to them. But the horn kept tooting all the time, and even if they wanted to help they couldn't, the car was half a mile ahead before they had time to think. The dusk changed to darkness, and on we went—for hours as it seemed to me. I was just a prisoner in the flying car, and there was no way of getting at the scoundrel in front.

"Suddenly we turned a sharp corner through a big open gateway, and went rushing up a long avenue. Before I had gone fifty yards I recognised the place. It came on me like a flash that this

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was Rockhurst, though why the deuce any one should kidnap me and run away with me to my brother's place I could not for the life of me imagine.

"About a hundred yards from the house the car ran in on the firm smooth sod and stopped with a jerk that threw me on my face and banged the top of my head against the woodwork in front. The same moment the door was banged open, and I was dragged out headforemost and flung sprawling on the grass. Then before I knew where I was they had tied me up—there were three of them—hand and foot with a brace of silk handkerchiefs, and stuffed another into my mouth.

"There was only just a thin little strip of moon, but the sky was full as it could hold of stars, and I could see that the three men round me were masked. One of the three was the chauffeur that had led me this dance. I had a good look at him and I made sure he was not Braddock, he was taller and thinner, and did not walk the same way. Keeping on the grass close under the trees, they carried me face upwards towards the house, so quickly that I could see the stars dancing in and out through the branches overhead, and they flopped me down like a sack of corn opposite the glass door—you know the spot, Beck—that leads out of Arthur's study——"

He broke off abruptly at the name of his brother. "Oh, my God, it is horrible to think what I saw

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a moment afterwards!" Then he got himself together and went on in the same deliberate way.

"Just as they dropped me, a chap slipped quickly out of the side door and ran round towards the front. 'All right!' he said in a whisper to the men who followed him, leaving me alone for a moment.

"Lifting myself a little on my elbows I could see that the room inside was brilliantly lighted. The light came out through the glass door and lay in a long white strip on the lawn. After a try or two I contrived to struggle from my elbows to my feet—it is no such easy job when you are tied hand and foot—and shuffled close to the glass and looked through. I won't get that sight out of my eyes if I live for a hundred years. There, stretched out on his back on the carpet, was poor Arthur, with the handle of a dagger sticking out through his shirt front, which was all blotched with blood. It was like daylight in the room, and a single glance showed me that he was stone dead.

"A kind of hoarse cry burst from me, in spite of the handkerchief that was stuffed into my mouth. I staggered and went back in a heap on the sod.

"One of the chaps, not the chauffeur, came running back and bent over me; I could see the sparkle of his eyes through his mask. He had a knife open in his hand, a queer-shaped knife, with a tortoiseshell handle and one long narrow blade. I thought at first he was going to cut my throat,

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and when he put a warm hand on mine, I remember thinking how clammy it was, but I never guessed why, though I wriggled like a worm to get away from him.

"'Lie still, curse you,' he said in a hoarse whisper, and there was fear in his voice as well as anger, 'I want to save you. I'm about sick of this kind of thing. They mean to throw you in the lake. Hold your hands steady, can't you?' He fumbled for a moment with the hard knots before he slit the handkerchief with the keen blade, and my hands were free. Then he stooped and did the same for my ankles, and pulled the gag out of my mouth. 'Run for your life,' he whispered; 'your motor is where you left it, run for your life. If they catch you, you are a dead man.'

"I didn't want to be told a third time. I raced like a greyhound across the grass to the hollow where my motor lay, I knew every inch of the ground. In a moment I caught sight of the lamps, in another I had set the engine going, jumped into the driver's seat, and was off down the avenue faster than I had come.

"I just let her rip at full speed along the empty road. At first I had no thought but to get clear away from the horror I had seen, to put space between me and the murderers, but as mile after mile sped by in the silent night my brain got into working order. Why had they murdered poor Arthur? Why had they brought me down to see the murder? Why had they let me go at the last moment to

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bring justice on them? These thoughts raced through my bewildered brain hunting for an answer as fast as the motor flew along the lonely road. I was surprised when the houses began to show closer and closer on either side, the green fields and hedges disappeared, and the houses were in rows. I was back again in the suburbs.

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CHAPTER VII

THE ARREST

"I CHECKED the tremendous speed at which the car had brought me from Kent when I found myself once more in the streets. Here and there there was a stray straggler, here and there a policeman at a corner.

"More than once I was tempted to stop the car to speak to the constable, and tell him what had happened. I longed to speak to some one, for I was in a blue funk, and that's the truth of it. But I knew, of course, the constable couldn't help, so I kept right on. I meant to call at my own house to ease Caroline's mind about myself, and then go straight on to Scotland Yard; it would have been better to have gone there first, but I knew the state Caroline would be in about me.

"I could not find my latchkey for the moment, so I just banged at the door—my own knock that Caroline might know it was I—and at the same moment two men jumped at me from behind and arrested me for the murder of my brother."

It was noticeable that throughout Peter made no protestation of his innocence. He just told

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his story straight on, taking it for granted that it would be believed.

Mr. Lewin listened with pursed-up lips. His big, round, heavy face was devoid of all expression, but his narrow eyes were as keen as a cat's.

"A curious story," he said at last. "I suppose they wanted to fasten the murder on you. But what was the motive? That's what beats me."

"That was it," assented Peter, "that was plainly their game. I should have mentioned that my hands were covered with blood when I was arrested, and my shirt-front splashed with it. It must have been the ruffian who cut the handkerchief who did that."

"Just so, just so," said Mr. Lewin. "But what was the motive?"

"I think I could guess at the motive," interposed Beck, "but there is no use guessing at present. Time will show whether I am right or not."

"Best reserve our defence to-morrow," said Mr. Lewin; "there is no use telling our story till we find the weak places in the prosecution."

But Peter wouldn't have it. "I'll tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth," he insisted, "from the start. It can't hurt me."

"I'm not so sure of that," retorted his counsel. "The truth is no good in court unless it is believed. Yours is a rummy story, you must see that yourself, Mr. Trevor—Lord Tresham, I suppose I should say, now that your brother is dead."

Was it at the back of his head to remind Peter

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that here was plain motive for the murder? His brother's death gave him title and wealth. If it was so, Peter did not take the hint.

"I will tell the truth," he repeated doggedly, "if I am hanged for it."

"I think you are quite right," put in Beck quietly; "it will be best in the long run."

Mr. Lewin shrugged his heavy shoulders, but said nothing more.

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CHAPTER VIII

COMMITTED

THERE was a dense fog next day and the electric lights in the police courts were hazy yellow blobs struggling vainly against the surrounding gloom. The court was almost empty when the case was called. For once the detectives had outwitted the Press and the public, and kept their own secret. There was just one reporter present, lucky man, who had got the straight tip somehow, and sat waiting ready with notebook open and pencil pointed at both ends. To him the whole business meant just a pile of profitable copy.

Alex Belton was present, sitting in a dark corner, where he could hear and see without being seen.

Mr. Errington, a bland-faced old gentleman with red cheeks and side whiskers, whom some one had nicknamed "Old bacon and eggs," took his seat on the bench at twelve sharp, and the case was called. Mr. Raleigh, K.C., appeared to conduct the prosecution, Mr. Lewin appeared for the defence. There was a comfortable self-assurance about him. As a matter of fact he did not believe that any man at the Bar could manage a ticklish

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case more dexterously, and the public shared his opinion.

"I need not tell your worship," said Mr. Raleigh, "that this is a case of supreme importance; the character of the crime, the position of the victim and of the accused make it so. I am instructed to ask your worship for a committal. I would, perhaps, be justified in offering merely formal evidence and asking for a remand, but I don't think it would be quite fair to the accused or his professional advisers. Even at this early stage the Crown is prepared with a powerful case, I will not say a conclusive case, and I propose to call witnesses without further comment. James Morgan."

A middle-aged man, staidly dressed, promptly stepped up on the table. Respectable would perhaps be the best word to describe him, respectable, honest and none too clever, who would do his duty with absolute competence and no more than his duty. He was middle-sized as well as middle-aged, with a dapper figure younger looking than his face. Iron-grey hair, very thick and smooth, was parted at one side over a high, narrow forehead, his eyebrows were thick and bushy, and his grey moustache and whiskers were cropped solid as a thickset hedge.

"Your name is James Morgan?" began Mr. Raleigh, while the magistrate's clerk scribbled furiously with a quill pen, and the reporter traced the shorthand logograms with a slow silent pencil on to his notebook,

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"You were valet to the late Lord Tresham, I believe?"

"Yes sir."

"You were engaged to replace John Gibson?"

"That's so."

"Your worship will remember the unfortunate man Gibson who committed suicide some months ago; there have been a succession of tragedies in the family lately,"—this was aside to the bench. To the witness: "How long have you been in Lord Tresham's employment?"

"About three months."

"How often have you seen his brother, the accused?"

"Before last night, do you mean?"

"Yes, before last night."

"About a dozen times I should say."

"You could not be mistaken about recognising him?"

"I think not."

"Had you not better come to the facts of the case, Mr. Raleigh?" said the magistrate.

"Immediately, your worship. You will see in a moment the question was relevant and necessary." To the witness—

"Where were you last night about eleven o'clock?"

"I was passing through the hall when I heard a motor stop at the front door, and I went to see who it was at that hour."

"Who opened the door?"

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" The footman, Reynolds. I saw a gentleman in a heavy motor coat and mask, who asked to see his lordship. He handed a note to Reynolds, who gave it to me, and I took it to his lordship, who was in his study at the time."

" Well? " said Mr. Raleigh, when the witness paused.

" His lordship was sitting at his table, reading and smoking. 'Certainly,' he said; 'tell the gentleman I will see him.' I went back to the hall and told him. I wanted to take his coat, but he said it was not worth while, that he would only be a moment, and with coat and mask on he went straight into the room.

" He must have taken the mask off as he went in, for I heard his lordship say as I closed the door, 'You are heartily welcome, old man; you must stay the night.' "

Again he paused and again Mr. Raleigh said, " Well? "

" They were together in the room," the man went on, " for about a quarter of an hour, I should say a quarter of an hour at most. When I went back with a soda syphon and whisky, which I always brought his lordship at that hour, his lordship was not in his seat. I thought at first the room was empty."

The witness hesitated. He was plainly stirred from his stolid self-composure by some terrible experience.

" What did you see? " asked Mr. Raleigh.

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The words came from the witness with a kind of gasp. "I saw his lordship stretched on the carpet. The ivory head of the old Chinese sword was sticking out of his chest, and his shirt-front was all over blood. At the same moment I noticed the strange gentleman in the motor coat in the act of passing out through the door at the other side of the room, and as I cried out he turned for a moment."

"Was the mask off?"

"It was off."

"Did you see his face?"

"As plain as I see yours now, sir."

"Whose face did you see at the door?"

"The face of Mr. Peter Trevor, his lordship's brother."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure."

"Turn round, Morgan, and look at the accused. Was that the man?"

"That was the man, so help me God."

There was dead silence in the court. Peter, pale as a ghost, stared straight at his accuser, who met his eyes with a curious deference in his looks as if apologising for bringing such a charge against a nobleman. Plainly it was that feeling that prompted his next words to Mr. Raleigh. "I would not think of swearing it, sir, if I was not quite sure."

For a moment it seemed that Peter would say

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something in reply. He leant forward and his lips opened, but whether it was that he thought better of it, or that he was unable to frame the words, he was silent.

"What did you do next?" asked Mr. Raleigh.

"I ran back into the hall shouting, 'The master is murdered!' The other servants came running up, men and girls. One of the maids peeped into the room and screamed. It was then the thought of the telephone came into my head, I generally answered at the 'phone for his lordship. In a minute or two I was on to Scotland Yard. It was Inspector Morrison that answered me, and I told him who I was. 'Listen,' I said, speaking as plain as I could. 'Lord Tresham has just been murdered by his brother, Mr. Trevor, who has gone back to London in his motor.'"

"That's all," said Mr. Raleigh, sitting down.

"Now, Mr. Lewin," said the magistrate.

For a moment Mr. Lewin measured the sedate man on the table with those keen eyes of his. "I ask this witness nothing," he said at last contemptuously; "you may go down, sir." His tone implied that the man was a manifest perjurer, not worth confuting.

The footman Reynolds was the next witness examined. A young man overwhelmed with the importance of the occasion, and stammering in the extremity of his desire to tell the truth. He deposed to the stopping of the motor at the door,

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of the man in the motor coat and mask going to Lord Tresham's room, and was let down by Mr. Lewin without a question.

Inspector Morrison deposed to receiving the telephone message and the arrest of the accused on his own doorsteps.

"Did you notice his hands?" asked Mr. Raleigh.

"Yes, sir, they were red with blood, and there was a streak of blood on his shirt-front."

The last witness was the rat-like detective whose name was Meelish. He came up with his notebook in his hand.

"Did you hear the witness say anything after Inspector Morrison had cautioned him?" asked Mr. Raleigh.

"I took a note of it at the time, sir. His wife asked: 'Is he murdered? Is Arthur murdered?' and the prisoner answered: 'Stabbed through the heart, my darling.'"

"Had any of the officers said anything before that as to how the late Lord Tresham had been killed?"

"No, sir."

"That's all the evidence I propose to give at present," said Mr. Raleigh and sat down.

"Your worship," said Mr. Lewin, "under ordinary circumstances I would reserve my defence, but my client desires, and I entirely approve, that the truth should at the earliest stage go before the public. He is the victim of a foul conspiracy which we will unmask before the case comes to an end.

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" Whether the man Morgan is suffering from some monstrous delusion, or is deliberately perjuring himself, I am not at present prepared to say, but so far as my client is concerned there is not a word of truth in his evidence."

Then with great dramatic force he told the story of Peter's wild drive through the country, and his terrible experience within sight of the room where his brother lay murdered. It was wonderful how real he made it appear.

" I will prove my case to the hilt, your worship," he said, " when the time comes."

" I trust so, I trust so," said the magistrate with real sympathy in his voice, " but at present I have only a very simple duty to perform."

" I cannot, of course, resist a committal order, your worship," said Mr. Lewin, " but if your worship can see your way to allow bail I can offer it to any amount you may fix."

" It is not a case for bail; you must see that yourself, Mr. Lewin."

So Peter was taken back to his cell, and Belton and Beck drove straight from the court to his wife.

Within a couple of hours, so promptly had the solitary reporter done his work, the evening papers were full of the case under scare headings: TERRIBLE TRAGEDY. LORD TRESHAM STABBED THROUGH THE HEART. HIS BROTHER COMMITTED FOR TRIAL. All other news had to take a back seat.

Alex Belton was much depressed as to the

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result. "It looks d——d black," he commented to Beck as they drove away from court together in the taxi. But Beck was cheery and confident.

"Your husband will come through all right," he said to the half-demented wife; "I have not a doubt of it. Time will show that I am right."

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CHAPTER IX

TEMPTATION AND EVASION

ONCE a day at least Beck visited the prison, generally in company with Alex Belton. But on the third day, about ten in the morning, he came alone. Peter was waiting for him, expectant and excited.

He jumped from his seat as Paul entered and took a letter from his pocket. "Look at that," he said; "I found it on my table last night, a short time after you left."

The letter was addressed to the Earl of Tresham in Peter's own handwriting. Beck looked up from scrutinising the envelope with a question in his eyes, and the other went on—

"Yes, I would swear it was my own writing if I did not know to the contrary. I guess why that was done. If I showed the letter to any one but you or Alex they would believe I wrote it myself, that fellow Lewin would believe it. But I didn't write it. Read man, read."

"My lord," the letter ran, "the writer of this knows you are innocent of the crime laid to your charge and will prove it on certain conditions. If you refuse those conditions you will hang.

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Perhaps you will guess what the conditions are, but I will be quite plain.

"Your late father left a certain secret paper in yours and your brothers' charge. Your brothers refused to give up the secret and died for their obstinacy, let that be a warning to you that we are in earnest. If you write to A.Y., Charing Cross Post Office, to be left till called for, a letter telling the hiding-place of your father's formula for the manufacture of rubies, a day after the formula is in the hands of the writer, you will be free and your innocence clearly established. If you refuse, or neglect to do this, you will go to the gallows and your wife and unborn child will be disgraced. I know you have taken an oath, but you are not wholly a fool, you will feel the circumstances absolve you."

The letter ended abruptly, there was no signature.

Peter, watching his friend closely as he read, was surprised at the delight on his face.

"It's all right, old man," Beck said as he folded the letter into the envelope and handed it back to him. "Just as I expected, you are as safe as a house."

"You think I should write to the scoundrel accepting the conditions," said Peter. "Well, I won't; I'd sooner take my chance of the gallows."

Beck opened his lips as if to speak, closed them and sat silent for a moment thinking. "Perhaps you had best consult Belton and your wife," he said at last, "before you decide."

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"What's the use? My wife would be sure to take your view. She would be for consenting to any conditions to get off. But I won't, that's flat."

"All I ask," replied Beck, "is that you do nothing for the present. Let me show the letter to Alex, there can be no harm in that."

"I don't like it," said the other. He spoke reluctantly as one who doubted his own resolution. "I should prefer to write straight away and refuse, but I suppose it can do no harm to wait a day or so."

Alex Belton, when he heard of the letter a little later, was strongly in favour of accepting the conditions, and argued the question eagerly, almost angrily with Beck. The unhappy wife, as might be expected, sided with him warmly.

"What do I care for their oaths and their rubies," she said, "if once Peter were safe? They are devils, devils, and they will murder him as they murdered his brothers if he refuses. Oh, Mr. Beck, I am ashamed of you; I expected you to put Peter before all that rubbish."

"I do," said Beck, wholly unmoved by her vehemence. "That's why I'm sure he should refuse."

"Besides," said Alex, as an afterthought, "the letter need not bind him to anything. We can watch the post office and grab the man that wrote to him. Very likely he is the leader of the gang."

"We may miss him," retorted Beck.

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"Not likely, if we are quick enough. But anyhow, Peter is safe."

"And that's all I want," exclaimed his wife passionately. "I don't care twopence what else happens. I just want him safe back to me."

Encouraged by her approval, Alex took a bold step on his own account. He went off at once, without telling Beck, to the prison and saw Peter alone, and earnestly urged him to save himself and his wife.

"She won't live, old man, if anything happens to you, she is killing herself as it is. What can an oath more or less matter against that? I know you don't give a curse for the old formula, if that was all. Why should the oath stop you? Your father would not ask you to keep such an oath if he were here to judge."

"He kept it himself, my brothers kept it to the death," urged Peter, but his heart was not in his words.

"Theirs was a different case. They had only themselves to think of, you have your wife as well. I swear on my soul that I think it would kill her if you came to grief. She bade me tell you that if ever you loved her you must do this for her sake."

Peter could hold out no longer. He was young and he loved the life which opened so fairly before him. For three days and nights the thought of death on the scaffold, death and disgrace for the crime of which he was wholly innocent, was ever before his mind, turning his heart to water. Yet

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do this justice to his manhood, it was for his wife's sake that he yielded at last.

"I am a horrible coward, Alex," he said.

"Don't be a fool, man," retorted the other; "you know in your heart you are doing the right thing, the sooner the better. I will go straight to your wife and tell her the letter is written and that you are safe. I only wish you could be with me to see her when she hears the news, it would put all those foolish scruples out of your head."

Wonderfully elated by his triumph, Alex started straight off to tell the good news to Lady Tresham, and poor Peter sat down reluctantly to write. He was still writing when five minutes later Beck came into the room.

"Well," said Peter, gloomily, as he looked up at him, but without moving from the chair or laying down the pen, "I am writing the letter, but I feel a d——d sneak, I can tell you."

"What letter?" asked Beck.

"What letter?" repeated Peter peevishly. "The letter you all three want me to write. Alex was here just now badgering me about it, with all sorts of messages from my wife until I had to give in."

"You mean you are going to write and tell the scoundrel where the formula is?"

"Just that."

"No, you don't, not if I had to knock you down to stop you."

"But I thought——" began Peter, jumping up from his chair in utter amazement.

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"Never mind what you thought, you thought wrong anyway. If that letter was wanted to save your life and your wife's—Alex was right there, anyway your death would kill her—I'd send it like a shot, the old oath wouldn't stand in my way, not much! But that is not the way to save you, it's the other way about. See here, old man," he went on with a sudden change of manner, "have I ever told you a lie yet? Have I ever told you a thing I wasn't quite sure of?"

"Not that I know."

"Well, I tell you this now and you may believe it. If you don't send that letter you are in as little danger of being hanged as I am, less, for I'd dearly like to murder the cold-blooded leader of the gang if I had a fair chance. Will you trust me?"

"With all my heart. I hated the notion of writing. But my wife?"

"I'll tell her what I told you, there isn't an atom of danger. Now take your pen up again, just write a sharp refusal. Tell the scoundrel to go and be hanged; that will be a relief to your feelings, won't it?"

"But why write at all?"

"For a good reason; Alex mentioned it a while ago, though I don't say it wasn't in my own mind before. We may catch the fellow out when he comes for the letter; it is a chance, anyway, worth trying."

So Peter sat down again at the old deal table,

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hacked and ink-stained by many nervous and desperate hands. He got as far as "Sir," and went on from that under Beck's dictation—

"I refuse absolutely and defy you to do your worst. If I die I will carry the secret with me to the grave."

The letter was addressed "A.Y., Charing Cross Post Office: to be left till called for."

"That's the sort of letter I like writing," growled Peter, getting up and stretching himself.

"A tempting bait," said Beck as he took the letter in his hand to post; "I wonder will it land the fish."

Next morning from an early hour two men loitered in the neighbourhood of Charing Cross Post Office, as unlike as any two men in London yet both on the same errand. The old broken-down loafer stood at the curb with a board of boot-laces and studs hanging loosely from his shoulders to be thrown off in case of need. The young dude with the foolish face, dressed in the extremity of fashion, fidgeted on the footpath at the door of the post office, consulting his watch every five minutes, and plainly waiting for his best girl.

A little after ten a messenger boy came in and without any hesitation or disguise walked straight to the counter and asked for a letter "A.Y., to be left till called for."

The clerk shuffled a big packet of letters as a dealer shuffles his cards, picked out one and handed it to the messenger. It so chanced that the

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dude was close enough at the moment to hear the question asked and to see the letter handed over.

By a curious coincidence, just at that moment, he got tired of waiting for his girl, consulted his watch for the last time, shrugged his shoulders and walked out of the office as it chanced close at the heels of the messenger. So they passed slowly up the pavement, the old tray man shuffling along a little behind.

The messenger boy kept looking round as he walked. An empty motor brougham, the windows open, came slowly up to the kerb behind the boy; as it crept past him he tossed the letter through the open window. Instantly the motor got up speed, darted out to the centre of the street and was lost in the stream of traffic.

The messenger boy felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up half frightened into the face of the dude. "I'm a tec., boy," he said, in a voice that carried conviction. "I was after that letter. Can you tell me the name of the man who got it? Can you describe him?"

"I don't know him from Adam," whimpered the boy. "His driver called me just now, gave me a bob, and told me to get the letter for him and what to do with it when I got it; that's all I know. God's truth, so help me."

There was no doubting the boy. "All right, sonny," said the dude, "here's another bob for the fright I gave you; now off you go," and the

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youngster went double quick pace down the Strand.

The loafer crept closer. "I took the number, Mr. Beck," he whispered.

"No use, Martin. Do you think a chap of that kind would keep his own number on his car? It is an archbishop's number, most likely. I am a greater fool than I look to be caught by a simple trick of the sort when the game was in my hands. I'll have my brains taken out and boiled and peppered, they are no use to me as they are."

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CHAPTER X

ALEX AS A DETECTIVE

ALEX was furious when he heard of the letter that was sent, and came near to quarrelling with Beck over it.

"Curse you, why did you interfere?" he shouted when Beck told him of it in his own room. "You have ruined everything. They'll hang him sure as a gun."

But Beck refused to quarrel, and he cooled down in a moment or two and apologised.

"You did it for the best, of course, I know that, but I cannot help thinking it was a horrible mistake. Well, we must do what we can to pull him off in spite of those devils, but I'm afraid it's no go, I'm afraid he's doomed."

That very evening Peter had another letter in his own handwriting which he kept back from his wife, just a line: "You have chosen the hangman."

"What do you think now?" asked Alex.

"What I always thought," answered Beck wholly unmoved, "there is no need to be frightened. I wish I had caught the scoundrel, of

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course; I was a fool to let him slip through my fingers, but Peter is right as the mail."

His confidence was infectious. Lady Tresham could not help trusting him, though she could not wholly conquer her fright for her husband.

But it must be confessed that so far as helping his friend out of his difficulties Beck just let things slide. Beyond setting two of his best men to shadow night and day the valet Morgan, who was staying at the Tavistock Hotel, he did nothing to unravel the mystery. Alex Belton, on the other hand, was restlessly on the alert, here, there and everywhere.

"It strikes me," he said to Beck in one of their many chats together, "that we should have a try to get hold of Peter's chauffeur, Braddock, his evidence should be useful if he is not in the swim."

"I can help you a bit, there," said Beck. "Braddock left the house at seven or a little after in plain clothes. He was to be back, as we know, to get into his motor livery and be ready at the door at half-past. The man was always most punctual."

"He went out for a drink," guessed Alex. "I'll have a try at the public-houses around."

Next morning he had his try. At the first two houses he drew blank. Braddock, who was known at the first place, had often had a drink at the bar, he had had a drink that day but not at that hour. The barman was quite sure. He had read the case in the papers and had fixed the day by that. At

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the second public-house they didn't know the man at all.

At the third Belton visited there was a girl behind the bar with watery blue eyes and a lot of fluffy pale hair. She didn't know any one of the name of Braddock, and Alex described him—a short-sized, red-faced man with black hair and a big black moustache. The girl gave a little gasp of fright.

"He had only one drink at the bar, sir," she said, "when he came in with his friend. It's the truth I'm telling, he seemed quite sober when he came in."

Alex understood. The girl was afraid of a prosecution for serving drink to a drunken man.

"It's not that, my girl," he said. "I'm not a detective and I don't care if all London got drunk on the premises. I only want to find the man. I believe he was hocussed by that friend of his. There is no blame coming to you, anyway, but maybe a reward instead if you just tell me the plain truth."

"Well, sir, it was this way," the girl said after a moment's hesitation: "the two of them, the man you are after and another, came into the bar about seven o'clock, or it may be a bit later, both quiet respectable looking men that any one would serve, and neither of them the worse for drink so far as I could see at the time. 'What will you have?' said the other one, not your friend. I beg your pardon sir, you know what I mean, the chap who came in with him, and he planked a sovereign on

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the counter. 'I'll have a pint of ale,' says he, 'if you don't mind.'

"There was a third man standing at the counter. 'Will you join us, mister?' says the first one; 'it's my lucky day.' 'I don't mind if I do,' said the other, so I drew a pint of ale all round. 'D——n bad stuff if you asks me,' said your friend, Braddock I think you calls him, when he drank his up at a pull. I pretended not to hear him, customers often talk like that to make great men of themselves and show they know what good stuff is.

"When Mr. Braddock a minute after flapped the palm of his hand on the bar and swore it was a d——d shame, the man that came in with him winked behind his back at the other chap. Braddock swore again, I could not make out what he said, his voice was that thick, and I saw he was not steady on his feet, there was a queer look in his eyes and I could see he was under the influence, though I had not noticed it at the first go off.

"'Easy does it, old man,' said his friend, and he whispered to me: 'We'll get him into a cab, miss, and take him home quietly. I didn't know he was so gone, or I wouldn't have brought him in here.'

"The three went out together, Braddock very unsteady on his feet and the other two holding him up. Now that you mention it, sir, I think they did put some stuff in his liquor. A pint of good ale could never knock a man over like that."

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The girl was professionally indignant at the notion of drugging a man's drink and anxious to help all she could. "You might tell me, sir, when the poor cove is found."

Alex promised. "You have given a helping hand to find him," he said, "for which I am very grateful." The weak eyes brightened as he laid a sovereign on the counter, but she put it from her irresolutely. "To buy gloves with," he insisted. "I'd buy them for you if I had time." The poor pale-faced drudge smiled and thanked him coquettishly. He could see that a sovereign meant a lot to her.

This kindness to the barmaid was rewarded at the next corner. There he found the man who had driven Braddock and his kidnappers. The stand was a long row of taxis, hansoms had all been exterminated, but at the tail of the procession a solitary growler stood its ground in spite of competition. The driver, a broad, red-faced, hoarse-voiced man, remembered the day well when Alex questioned him.

"One of the gentlemen was greatly overcome," he said. "The other two helped him into the keb and one got in with him to look after him. 'Kebby,' said the one as stood out, a short-sized man, 'our pal here is a bit sprung.' 'Which same may happen to the best of us, sir,' ses I, 'He's mate,' says he again, 'on board one of those barges down Wapping way which I can't rightly think of the name for the moment, but my friend in the

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keb, he knows it by sight, anyway. He wants him to get on board without the old man seeing him, he is cruel hard on drink, being a blue ribbon man himself. An hour's sleep and he will be as right as the mail. It will be a thick 'un in your fob if you land him safe.' And so I did, and that's all that's to it."

When Alex pressed him for the name of the barge "kebby" was surly at first, suspicious of blue ribbon intrigue to get a cove into trouble. But when he was convinced it was a case of doctoring a man's drink all his sympathies, like the barmaid's, were instantly enlisted against the doctorers.

"We put him on board a barge named *Mary Sweet*, it being empty at the time and ready to go down with the tide the next morning. I gave a hand with the other to get him down to his berth, and that's all I know about it."

Chartering the cab, Alex drove to the wharf from which the *Mary Sweet* had started with her unconscious passenger, and after casting about for a time, they found a night watchman, who, for a consideration, was able to further enlighten him.

The night watchman was rather prolix; he seemed to have much time at his disposal. "Why, of course, I know the boat," he said; "the captain called her the *Mary Sweet* after his best girl when he was courting; she is his wife now, but it's not so easy to change a boat's name once she is known by it, so he says to me on this very wharf, says he——"

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"When will the boat he back?" asked Alex.

"That's more than I can tell you," said the night watchman, surly at this breaking in on his anecdote, but he softened visibly at the sight of half-a-crown.

"I'd find his wife for you, sir, if that would do. She keeps an account of his goings and his comings, and she'd know for certain."

The wife was found in the front parlour of a row of houses, all white-blinded, green-doored and brass-knockered, as like each other as the eggs of the same hen.

The first glance at Mrs. Battisman justified the insinuation of the night watchman. "Mary Sweet" of the courting days was now a stout, able-bodied woman nearly six feet in her shoes, with shining black hair parted in the centre and brushed down straight on either side of a broad forehead, a comely, masterful face, the face of a woman that would be mistress of her own dominion, whether a kingdom or number six, Paradise Row.

Mrs. Battisman quickly satisfied any doubts that Alex might have as to the fate of the missing chauffeur.

"The cove was found," she said in answer to his question, "in the mate's bunk. My man wrote it to me; he writes when he can," she added significantly, "when he is away from home," and she took from her ample bosom a big sheet of paper scrawled over with a score or so of words to a page, and handed it to Alex to read: "The drunken

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cove is all right; we'll be home on the full tide about two o'clock the day after to-morrow."

"Certain?" Alex asked.

"Quite sartin. When John Battisman promises me to do a thing he does it," or knows the reason why, was implied in the tight setting of her lips. "Thank you, sir, I couldn't take it. No trouble at all, you are very welcome. If you meet the boat to-morrow at two o'clock you'll find the cove you're after."

Next day, at half-past two o'clock, Alex drove triumphant to Beck's door with Braddock, none the worse for his unpremeditated trip, beside him in the taxi.

The three got together in Beck's sitting-room, and Braddock, having modestly admitted that he "wouldn't mind" a pint of bottled ale, and having disposed of half the contents of the glass at a gulp, told the story of his adventures.

"I was strolling out for a breath of fresh air," he said. One would fancy that enough and to spare of fresh air is to be had in the front seat of a motor car, but that's not the point. It was fresh air Braddock was in quest of, he said so and he ought to know.

"As I was turning the corner of a quiet street," he went on, "I heard some one calling behind, and a chap about my own size came running after me with a sovereign between his fingers.

"'Did you drop that?' he said, offering it to me then and there.

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"It was a chance that would tempt any man, but I heard my voice saying 'no' before I could stop it. 'There aren't so many sovereigns loose about me, old man,' I said after that.

"He looked a bit surprised. Well he might; chaps don't often refuse money. 'Sure?' he says. 'There was no one in the street but you.' I shook my head; I couldn't bring myself to speak, I was that riled.

"'Well,' he says, very pleasant, 'if it wasn't you that lost it, it was I that found it, and we must break it together. You'll have a drink, anyway?' So I said I didn't mind as he was so pressing, something of the same kind of notion was passing through my own head at the time.

"He brought me into a little pub that I'd never been in before, with a fluffy-haired girl behind the bar. I was middling thirsty and I took my pint off at a pull, like, but there was a bad taste at the tail end of it. Almost at once I began to have a queer feel in my head, and the room began to rock like a boat at sea. The girl behind the bar went up to the ceiling and down again. I just remember one of the coves saying, 'Come along, we'll see you all right,' and after that I remember nothing at all.

"Captain Battisman told me it was near twelve next day when they found me lying like a log in the mate's bunk. They thought I was dead drunk at first, but the captain said he never saw a man drunk like that in his lifetime, and the mate said he ought to know and they had words

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over it. A few hours later I came to myself a bit, and a sicker man you couldn't find in Guy's Hospital, with a head on me I hadn't deserved, and I knew for certain my drink had been doctored. The mate said he had been drugged once himself, and that was the way of it. I wanted to be put ashore at once, but the captain said, laughing, that we were a hundred miles away from anywhere. I says I was bound to be at the door at half-past seven sharp to drive my master to dinner, and he says if the master hadn't started before the dinner would be cold.

"When my head and my stomach had quieted down I began to enjoy myself. Both the fellows were good to me and the grub and beer were first rate. But why in glory I was shipped off I can't say."

"Were you robbed?" It was Beck asked the question.

"Not a cent, my watch and my money were on me, but the chaps that did it took the key of the motor house where my coat and cap were hanging."

"That was it, that was it," cried Alex eagerly; "you see, Beck, it entirely bears out Peter's story. They hocussed his drink and the other chap drove in his coat and cap. Braddock's evidence should clear him."

"Not quite, I'm afraid," said Beck dryly. "Suppose the Crown say it was Peter himself that got Braddock put out of the way?"

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"Jove, I never thought of that. But there must be proof somewhere if we can only come by it. I've a great mind to run down to Rockhurst and hunt round for evidence. Will you come?"

"You don't want me, old man, you can do it off your own bat better than I can. You've managed this business about Braddock as neatly as the best detective that ever stepped. It was too devilish clever of you. Try your luck yourself at Rockhurst and take all the credit if you succeed, as I haven't the least doubt you will."

"You are not chaffing?"

"Never felt less like chaffing in my life."

"By Jove, then, I'll have a try at it."

"I knew you would, and I know you'll pull it off."

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CHAPTER XI

THE CLUES ACCUMULATE

After an early breakfast Alex set out next morning in his motor for Rockhurst. Already the sun had made breaches in the white clouds, through which the blue showed vividly in widening patches. The morning breeze was cool, but there was no sting in it as it blew freshly in his face. When the car cleared the suburbs and came into the open country Alex felt the spirit of the spring all round him making life glorious. The world was waking in the birds that fluttered and sung in the hedgerows, in the primroses scattered in sudden showers of pale gold on mossy banks, in the line of distant trees, faint green against the clear blue of the spring sky.

What a contrast, he thought, to the mad drive along the same road which Peter had so vividly described. He smiled to himself at the thought, for he meant to save Peter alive from the terrible trap into which he had fallen, and he was strangely confident of success. The tall towers of Rockhurst showed above the trees as the motor swept along the smooth road. Very peaceful and silent was

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the scene in the bright sunshine of the spring morning, and something of sadness seemed to mingle with the silence, for the owner of it all lay in prison, waiting his trial on the most horrible of all charges, the murder of his brother.

The car came swiftly up the winding avenue, and the wheels tossed the loose gravel of the wide sweep as it whirled round and stood panting at the broad flight of stone steps that led to the front door.

The old housekeeper, Mrs. Henderson, in her black silk dress and lace cap, under which the smooth bands of her white hair showed whiter than the lace, received him in the hall, for she had heard of his coming. Her kindly old face was clouded, she had known Master Peter from a boy.

" It is not true, sir," was her first greeting from an overcharged heart as Alex shook hands with her in the hall, " he would never do the like. He and Master Arthur never had a quarrel from the time they were boys together; it's the devil's lie to say he killed him."

" I'm sure of it," said Alex cordially, to comfort the poor old soul, " and I want you to help me to prove it."

" I will do what I can, sir, but I'm afraid that's not much."

" Well, I want you first to show me the room in which the murder was committed."

The broad dark patch on the carpet told at once where the dead body had lain, stabbed through the

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heart. Alex searched the room with his eyes as if the scene of the tragedy might hold some shadows of the actors, might give some help to fathom the manner of the crime. The conclusive evidence that was at once forthcoming against Peter, he rightly guessed, would make the police less diligent in their search for other clues, and he hoped to find something of importance that they had overlooked in their haste.

"It was through that door," he asked Mrs. Henderson, "that Morgan swore he saw him pass?"

"The liar!" cried the old lady passionately. "From the first I never liked that man; I'm glad now, I never could abide him."

"Morgan swore he went from the room straight to the telephone," said Alex, thinking aloud without regard for his companion. Then, suddenly startled by his own words, a new notion seemed to strike him. "By Jove, there's a chance of it," he cried. "Where is the telephone, Mrs. Henderson? I want to see it at once."

She brought him to a glass-pent house, a kind of big bow window at the end of a narrow passage. "Has any one used it since the night of the murder?" he asked.

"No one, sir. That Morgan had a key, I have another. I have kept it locked since, there has been no need to use it."

"Good," said Alex, as she opened the door for him, "we shall find the receiver as he left it." The door closed behind them with a spring. Belton

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took the receiver from the stand and examined it closely. "I was right, I was right," he cried in a voice that set Mrs. Henderson trembling with excitement.

"For the love of God what is it, sir?" she asked.

In his excitement he seemed to have forgotten she was there; her question recalled him to himself.

"Look for yourself," he cried; "it is lucky you are here."

The old lady fumbled for her spectacles, set them on her nose with a hand that trembled, and peered closely to where he pointed. On the dark smooth wood there was a darker stain that spoiled its polish.

"Can't you see, woman, can't you see?" he exclaimed, carried away by his excitement. "It's a blood stain, I'll swear it's a blood stain. There was blood on the scoundrel's right hand when he sent his lying message, the blood of the man he had just murdered."

"Lord 'a mercy," cried the old woman, trembling all over, "but I believe you are right, sir."

"We will have an expert from London to examine it. Lock the door, Mrs. Henderson, and keep it locked till he comes."

But evidence still more startling was yet to find. To miss no chance that some half-forgotten word or incident might throw light on the mystery, Alex questioned the servants whom Mrs. Henderson sent in to him, one after the other. He found them

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one and all full of hatred of Morgan, a hatred that was eager to implicate him in the murder.

But they had nothing of moment to tell, nothing but their own blind surmises and suspicions, until he came, almost at the end of the list, to the second housemaid, Susan Cottar, a pretty bright-eyed girl of about eighteen, all a-quiver with shyness and eagerness combined.

"It was Morgan that did it," she broke out the moment she came into the room, "and Mrs. Henderson knows that it was he as did it."

"That's no use, my good girl," said Alex, smiling in spite of himself, "we must have proof."

"Isn't it proof enough, sir, that I'm ready to take my oath on it?"

"It would be no use unless you saw him do it."

"I saw him that day in the back drawing-room where he had no right to be, fiddling with the Chinese dagger about an hour before it happened."

"What?" shouted Alex, so sharply that he frightened the girl.

"It is truth I'm telling you, sir," she said, almost in tears. "Leastways he had it in his hand when I came into the room sudden, and he looked as if he would like to stick me with it."

"But the Chinese dagger was kept in Lord Tresham's study, wasn't it?"

"Begging your pardon, sir, but it was kept hanging on a hook in the back drawing-room. Times and again I've dusted it. His lordship was in his study when I saw it in Morgan's hand."

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"Did he take it away with him?"

"He put it back on the hook when I was there, but he may have taken it afterwards for anything I can tell. Is that any good to his lordship?" she asked shyly, for she saw he was writing down what she had told him.

"Splendid, my girl, splendid," he said, "good enough to save your new master."

"Then Mrs. Henderson will be pleased with me, Master Peter's name is always in her mouth." Plainly Mrs. Henderson was a favourite with the household. "There's another thing too sir," said Susan, when he had finished writing. Cook saw Morgan washing his hands that night in the kitchen sink."

Cook was recalled and confirmed the story that she saw him washing with a lather of soap. Why hadn't she told it before? How was she to know the gentleman wanted to hear a thing of the kind? She had often washed her own hands at the sink, for the matter of that.

"It was blood the villain was washing from his hands," cried out Mrs. Henderson, "the blood of his lordship."

Though Alex was sorely tempted to tell his startling news by telephone, he restrained himself. The blood-stained receiver must rest where he and Mrs. Henderson had left it, so he carried his story back in the motor car to Beck, whom he found at lunch in the club.

"You've done it this time," cried Beck triumph-

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antly. "Didn't I tell you Peter would pull through? though I confess, when all's said and done, that I didn't exactly know how. But you have blown the case against him to little bits."

"Just luck," said Alex modestly, with a touch of mockery in his voice. Beck so often boasted of his luck.

"Not a bit of it. You have gone straight to the right places with your eyes open, and picked up the scent like a foxhound. Faith, if I committed a crime, Alex, I would not like to have you after me."

"Nor I you," laughed Alex; "I can return that compliment."

"Very likely it would be a long chase either way," said Beck. "But, by Jove, this is great news. We must go straight to Mr. Arkins, the Crown Solicitor, with this new evidence. I guess it will be a case of 'Don't fire, Colonel, I'll come down.' The Crown can't go on in the face of this exposure."

Mr. Arkins did not knock under so readily as was expected. He was inclined to pooh-pooh the whole story till he made a trip on his own account to Rockhurst, carrying a bacteriologist and finger-print expert down along with him. But on his return next day he was more reasonable.

"I congratulate you, Mr. Belton," he said; "you have unravelled the mystery and completely cleared Lord Tresham of any connection with the crime. The stain on the receiver is blood right

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enough, and there is no doubt at all as to how it got there. The women are plainly telling the truth; that bit of evidence about the Chinese dagger would be enough in itself. The chauffeur, what's his name, Braddock, whom you hunted up so cleverly, confirms the curious story which his lordship told from the first, and which I must honestly confess I thought was a fairy tale at the time. I have talked it over with Mr. Raleigh and he agrees with me that we should not go further in the case. I will enter a *noli prosequi* on the part of the Crown. Lord Tresham will be discharged. But it is better there should be a formal application in court. For every one's sake it is better that the whole facts should go to the public, who have been fed up by the papers with all sorts of lies."

"It looks as if the scoundrel Morgan was the murderer himself," suggested Belton.

"So Mr. Raleigh thinks. We have arranged to arrest him this evening. He can have no suspicion. You have kept quiet about this business, I hope?"

"I have not breathed a word to a soul," said Alex.

"Nor I," echoed Beck.

"That's all right. With a cute dog of that kind one cannot be too cautious."

Alex was eager to be off with the good news to his friend, and to carry him home to his wife. Beck preferred to wait for Morgan's arrest. "We may

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light on something startling," he said, "if we take him unawares."

"Inspector Morrison is in charge," remarked Mr. Arkins. "I'm sure he will be glad of your company, Mr. Beck. You will find him somewhere near the Tavistock Hotel."

Strolling round by Covent Garden, Beck saw a big porter lounging round one of the stalls, apparently waiting for a job.

"Good afternoon, Inspector," he said in a whisper as he went by.

For a moment the Inspector was annoyed, and the annoyance showed on his good-natured face, but it cleared when he saw who had spoken.

"You have sharp eyes, Mr. Beck, but it doesn't matter, any way, who knows me. Half an hour ago I got my orders to nab Morgan. I'm right glad Lord Tresham is cleared of the business."

"Why don't you arrest the fellow at once?"

"For one thing I don't know whether he is in the hotel or not, and I don't want to make a fuss. I've got my men posted to take him, going out or coming in, as the case may be."

"That's all right," answered Beck; "I can find out for you whether he is there or not. I have been doing a little shadowing on my own account. You are not the only sham porter in Covent Garden, Morrison."

The man he pointed to about twenty yards off standing in the litter of the market was more of a loafer than a porter, a picker-up of unconsidered

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jobs and trifles. Beck signed to him and he slouched across to where he stood with the Inspector.

"Is Morgan in the hotel, Worthley?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," the man answered promptly in an accent that was in curious contrast with his appearance. "He came in at eleven last night, and he has not stirred out since."

"It is now after three," said the Inspector, glancing at his watch; "he must soon be on the move."

"Better take him at once and have done with it," suggested Beck.

"I can't go into the hotel in this toggery," objected the Inspector.

"Then cut back to your office in a motor and change to uniform. I'll wait around and buy fruit or flowers. Cut away."

It was nearly half-past three o'clock before Morrison returned, clothed in uniform and in authority, and meanwhile Morgan had not showed up. The Inspector went straight to the hotel door, Beck following a yard or so behind him. He whispered a word or two to the manager, and a waiter was called and bade "Show the gentleman to No. 27."

"We'll go up by the staircase," said the Inspector; "you might keep the lift down here till we come back. Are you armed, Mr. Beck?" he whispered as they climbed the stairs. "I wouldn't wonder if he shows fight unless we take him by surprise."

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For answer Beck touched the pocket of his coat, which bulged a little.

"That will do, sonny," said the Inspector, when the waiter had pointed to No. 27 at the end of a passage, "you can go now in case of trouble."

Silent as a cat the big man stole down the passage, his hand closed on the door-handle and he turned it without a sound. The door shot open, and, with Beck still close behind him, he burst into an empty room.

Clothes were about the floor and on the chairs, and there was a little pile of black ashes in the grate. In some subtle way the room suggested to the four keen eyes that searched it, not emptiness merely, but desertion. A moment more put it beyond doubt.

"What have we here?" cried Beck, opening a loose bundle on a table in the corner of the room. "Oh, d——n it all, Morrison, the fellow has fooled us like a brace of babies."

What he had there was a grey wig, whiskers, eyebrows and a stubby moustache, lying where the fugitive had thrown them in derision of his would-be captors. Beck could fancy him savouring the grim joke, laughing to himself miles away.

"Smart, too d——d smart," he said, fingering the various bunches of hair in involuntary admiration, "the best of their kind I've ever seen. To think I watched the scoundrel for an hour in the police court and never once suspected that."

The clothes scattered on the floor and chairs

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were the clothes that James Morgan had worn at the police court. The Inspector, rummaging in the pockets, pulled out a tortoiseshell-handled knife, the facsimile of the knife which Peter, Lord Tresham, had described as cutting him free. The blade and handle were stained, apparently with blood.

"Another proof," he said, "if we wanted more proof."

"He left it for us to find," answered Beck, "he wants Lord Tresham acquitted."

"But how did he get the hint to be off? That's what beats me," said Morrison.

That was soon explained; on inquiry in the office they learned that Morgan had a wire that morning about nine o'clock, just after breakfast.

"But who sent it?" grumbled the perplexed Morrison, as they went out together into the street, "who knew enough to send it?"

"That's what we have got to find out if we can," Beck answered. "When we know that we'll know everything The telegram itself, I fancy, is in ashes in his bedroom."

"Worthley," said Beck to the loiterer, as he and the Inspector walked disconsolate across the street from the hotel, "you are quite sure that Morgan did not go out?"

"Quite sure."

"Did a young man go out at ten o'clock or thereabouts?"

"Yes, sir, a young man with a muffler and a

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cap pulled over his eyes. He had a bag and seemed to be in a bit of a hurry, for he called a taxi and drove away. How did you guess that, sir?"

"Oh, I can guess eggs when I see shells, and that's about all I can do. I have just got the sell of my life, Worthley."

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CHAPTER XII

FREE

Now and again a writer telling a true story as best he can comes slap up against the impossible. He cannot describe, he cannot try to describe so as to convey any notion of the thing to his readers, the meeting of a husband who has been held up on a charge of murder—the evidence black against him—with the wife who has been breaking her heart over it. If the readers cannot imagine it for themselves the writer may just as well let it alone.

Peter had suffered from long strain, but he had kept a stiff upper lip through it all. The wife had suffered a more subtle torture in her hourly fear for him, and it told upon her. In those few days she had grown pitifully wan and haggard. Her cheeks had shrunk and the bones showed, her eyes looked unnaturally large and were rimmed with a pale sickly blue.

" Oh, my darling, my darling, how you must have suffered ! " he cried, aghast at the change in her as she threw herself sobbing into his arms and kissed and fondled him hysterically, all the time holding him close lest he might slip from her embraces.

" Don't cry, sweetheart," he whispered, " there

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is nothing to cry about now. Oh, won't I give you a high old time to make up for what you have gone through on my account!"

Alex, his boyish face lit up with delighted sympathy, stood shyly apart, watching them from the far end of the room. It almost seemed a breach of confidence to be present at so intimate a meeting. But presently Peter, who at first had eyes only for his wife, caught sight of him.

"Come here, old man," he cried, "I want my wife to thank you. No man ever had a better friend. Caroline, if you are glad to have me back unhung it's Alex you have to thank for it. If I were to talk for a week I could not tell you what he has done for me."

She turned with both her hands stretched out, her beautiful dark eyes full of tears.

"I can't thank you," she said, "I can't try. I could for a small thing, but not for this. Oh, how I have suffered! No one knows what I have suffered. I cannot believe even yet that it is all over and that he is safe, and I will never forget as long as I live that I owe it all to you, never."

"Please don't talk like that," he protested, apparently overpowered by this torrent of gratitude. "I have done nothing to deserve it, nothing at all. Any one would have done as much for his friend."

"Oh, you won't cheat me in that way," she answered, smiling through her tears; "I know what I owe you."

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"It is a lot less than you think," persisted Alex.

"No, no," she cried, "I won't have you say that."

Impulsively she caught his handsome face between her hands, and kissed him on the forehead. "I love you next to Peter in the whole world," she whispered, "for it was you gave Peter back to me."

There was a formal appearance at the police court, and Lord Tresham was discharged with profuse sympathy and congratulation from Mr. Raleigh, who briefly explained the changed aspect of the case with a warm compliment to the devotion and sagacity of Mr. Belton, who had unravelled the mystery that had deluded the police. "It was to him alone," said Mr. Raleigh, "that his good friend, Lord Tresham, owed his escape from the terrible position in which he had been placed by the machinations of malignant conspirators, whom I trust will speedily be brought to justice."

The court was crammed tight as herrings in a barrel with an excited audience, and Lord Tresham and Alex Belton were cheered all along the street as they drove off together.

The evening papers took up the theme enthusiastically (it was rather a slack time), and there were columns and columns of the "Tresham Mystery," explanations, anticipations and sympathetic eulogies of Lord Tresham in "the trying ordeal to which he had been subjected," and enthusiastic

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appreciation of the marvellous ingenuity displayed by his friend Mr. Belton.

All day Lord Tresham's door was besieged with sympathisers, and the king himself sent a kindly message. Highest compliment of all, when a few days later he took his seat in the House of Lords every member of that steady assembly, the hardest in the world to move to enthusiasm, rose in his place and greeted his entry with a subdued murmur of applause. In this swelling chorus of congratulation the malignant whispers, which from the first connected his name with the deaths of his brothers, were completely drowned.

But it was not till a few days later at Rockhurst that he was able to shake off the fear that he would be himself the next victim of the gang that had murdered his father and his two brothers.

Three men sat together at the table in the small dining-room at Rockhurst after the ladies had left, and in all England there were not three closer friends. They were known as the "Three Musketeers" in the Comrades' Club, and indeed wherever they were known at all.

The dinner was to celebrate Alex's detective triumph and Peter's escape. Lady Tresham had dined, of course, and the only other lady was her dearest friend, Lady Twickham, whose husband was away hunting an illusory black pearl in Paris.

"Stay as long as you like, Peter," said his wife, as the two ladies left the room. "I know you have

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a lot to say to each other, and Rosalind and I can manage our talk without you."

Instinctively the men, like soldiers off duty, dropped into an easier attitude, lolling a little on their chairs and resting an elbow on the table. Beck was preparing to light a cigar.

"No," ordered Alex, "you get none of this claret if you smoke. It's sacrilege, man; wait till we finish the bottle."

"You're a judge, Alex," said Peter, filling his glass. "The governor used to say it was the finest claret in the world. Hold it to the light and you'll get the true pigeon-blood ruby, the colour he was after so long."

"And that other people are after still," said Alex, sipping his wine appreciatively. "No wonder they want to be millionaires; only a millionaire could afford such wine."

His words brought a cloud to Peter's good-humoured face. "I'm not a nervous man," he said, "but I don't like the notion that the devils are still on my track."

"Devil," corrected Beck; "in a gang like that there is always a Lucifer, the others don't count."

"I fancy we have choked him off, anyway," said Alex. "He must have had about enough of this game, I should say."

"Don't believe it," retorted Peter. "Just think what the stakes are, old man; the thought of it often frightens myself. The old fairy tale of the

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purse that was always cram full of gold pieces isn't in the same street with the governor's invention. It means just as much money as a man wants. I may tell you two chaps that the formula is as simple as kiss hands, it is all written on three inches square of parchment and is astonishingly easy to work, any chap could do it. In three days, the governor told me, he could turn out a pint of big rubies if he wanted to. Just think of measuring them by the pint, that's what struck me at the time. He said he could make them just as big, or as small as he pleased. Why, it's a ruby mine in a man's waistcoat pocket. Do you think, Beck, that your Lucifer, as you call him, is likely to give up having another shot at a treasure like that? "

" Never," said Beck emphatically. " The fellow is too infernally clever to lose hope, and he knows the value of what he is after, and won't let a murder or two stop him. By hook or by crook he means to have the formula."

" You have a deuced pleasant way of putting it, I must say, Beck," broke in his lordship; " you talk as if murder was an amusing little incident. According to you I'm always to have the drawn sword of what's his name hanging over my head."

" Nothing of the kind," retorted Beck cheerfully. " According to me you are as safe as a house for twenty-one years and upwards, as the lawyers say."

" How do you make that out? " It was Alex that chipped in with this question.

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"Why, it's as clear as mud. Our friend Lucifer wants this formula, he has tried his dead best to get it, and failed to torture confession out of any of the three men who knew. Peter was the last chance, and he put on top pressure when he gave him the choice of disclosure or the hangman. That's why I was so confident that Peter would pull through all right."

"Don't talk in riddles, old man," said Peter himself.

"The answer to the riddle is as plain as a pike-staff. You are the last man, the only man now that knows the secret; it would die with you if you died, so he daren't kill you, see?"

"It was a close squeak the last time, all the same. If it wasn't for Alex here——"

"Shall I say what I think?—you won't mind, Alex? You would have got out all right if Alex had gone to sleep and slept the whole time. The truth would have come to light one way or another, they had arranged the truth should come to light if you didn't give in, they simply couldn't afford to lose you, Peter. That's why I was so strong in getting you to answer the letter as I did. If our friends once got hold of the secret the sooner you were out of the way the better, and the gallows was as good a way out as another."

"'Pon my soul, I believe you are right," confessed Alex ruefully, "and I was just playing the scoundrel's game all the time when I thought I was checkmating him. You have a nice way of

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taking the gilt off the gingerbread, Beck, I must say."

"Didn't I let you get all the glory from the press and the public?" laughed Beck; "doesn't Lady Tresham believe you are a hero of the first water? I haven't told her a word of all this. You sit tight, Alex, on your laurels, and I won't give you away."

"I don't want to be a hero on false pretences, thank you," grumbled Alex, "when you've proved me a donkey. By Jove, this is enough to drive a man to drink." He filled himself another bumper of the superlative claret, and sipped it with evident enjoyment.

"Are you quite sure, though, that I am safe, Beck?" asked Lord Tresham, carefully lighting a cigar.

"Quite, until your eldest son that's not born yet comes of age. They won't let you die if they can help it; you will have a guardian devil to look after you, Peter, and see you don't get into trouble. Meanwhile we have our chance to lay our hands on the prime scoundrel; while you are fighting on velvet he daren't hurt you."

"Do you think there is a chance of our getting level with him?" asked Alex.

"Every chance. Why not? He is only a man, after all."

"A d——d clever one, if you ask me."

"A devil!" added Peter.

"I mean to catch him all the same," said

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Beck, confidently, "if I give half my life to the job."

"Count me in," cried Peter and Alex together.

"A strong team," said Beck; "if we three work together he cannot escape us."

"Here's to his death and damnation!" Alex rose with his full glass in his hand, and the three drank to the toast standing.

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CHAPTER XIII

SON AND HEIR

It was about the best moment of Lord Tresham's life when the famous lady's doctor, Wilfrid Andrews, opened the door of the library softly, almost stealthily, and looked in with a smiling face that told his good news before he spoke.

"I have to congratulate you, my lord; a very fine boy, and Lady Tresham as well as we could reasonably expect."

Poor Peter had earned that moment of supreme joy by a fortnight of intense anxiety. He was always one of those men who never think that harm can come to themselves, but are horribly nervous about those they love. A torturing dread that his wife would die in childbirth had taken hold of him gradually,—at first a mere faint shadow. It grew black and blacker as the days went by, till it filled his soul with gloom.

From the day of his marriage he had longed for a son, and when a child was coming he cursed himself for that longing. It was only his wife he wanted, nothing else in the world mattered if he could keep her. There was danger, Dr. Andrews did not conceal from him the fact that there was

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grave danger. "Lady Tresham is in delicate health," he said; "that fortnight of intense anxiety —your lordship knows to what I allude—I myself always considered the authorities behaved shamefully—with unpardonable precipitancy. Lady Tresham was not in a state of health to warrant such a shock at the time; it makes her present condition the more critical, but of course we hope for the best. Your lordship must not have any anxiety about her, there is nothing to be gained by that."

Probably not, but the great doctor might as well have advised a man with toothache not to have any pain. Peter's anxiety grew from day to day, it followed him into the sanctuary of sleep in all kinds of disquieting dreams.

That particular evening he had made a pretence of dinner, and for some hours afterwards sat silently smoking and thinking, divided between longing for news and dreading it. Outside a great red summer sun sent its slanting rays into the woods, filling them with a strange light, the smooth sod of the lawn was vivid green, and the flowers of the round and oval-shaped beds shone like many-coloured jewels. The air, faint with perfume, breathed through the open windows in soft sighs, but he sat on unconscious of his surroundings beside the fireless hearth and smoked stolidly till the sun went to bed in a crimson couch, and the dusky veil of evening covered the beauty of the scene.

Right opposite in another chair, silent as himself, smoked Alex Belton. Though neither spoke a

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word, there was comfort for Peter in that silent companionship. Two horses standing side by side in their stalls have the same kind of comfort.

Then came the moment of supreme joy, and Peter, a new, exhilarated, intoxicated Peter, was on his feet wringing the doctor's hand and babbling incoherent gratitude.

He was let see the mother and child, just for a moment. The word " mother " gave him a curious thrill when the doctor spoke it, he had not thought of himself as a father.

Though the bedroom was nearly a hundred yards away at the other side of the rambling house, he walked the whole way on tiptoe to the door. In the dim, silent room a woman was moving softly to and fro. She wore no nurse's uniform and he recognised her at a glance as old Maggie Reddington, who had nursed his wife from a baby and whom his wife insisted on having beside her when her own baby came.

The woman's face beamed with joy and pride.

" A lovely baby, my lord," she whispered, " and my own dear girlie is doing beautiful."

Her " own dear girlie " was as white as the pillow on which her head rested, but the dark eyes opened slowly, full of love, and a thin hot hand crept out to clasp his tightly.

" Poor little Mother Hubbard," he whispered as he bent down to kiss her forehead, " I'm afraid you have had a terrible time."

" Oh, I'm all right now, darling," she whispered

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back—it was wonderful what pride and joy there was in that faint whisper—" and oh, Peter, he is such a beauty."

A queer contrivance all wire-work, ribbons and silk curtains swung from two high brass stands close to the bed. Maggie Reddington raised a filmy veil of lace and gave him one glimpse of the " beauty."

Peter had always hated babies. " All alike," he used to say, " ugly little devils that feel like frogs : jolly enough when they grow up into children, but as babies they are the limit." But he kissed the tiny sleeping face of this little frog fervently; it was his own, his firstborn.

In the library when he went down his friend, who had sat with him so patiently through the long ordeal, was waiting with hearty congratulations. Peter was as exuberant as a boy let off a licking and let loose for a holiday instead. His grip hurt Alex's hand as he wrung it.

" Easy on, old man," cried the other, shaking the pain out of his fingers, " you don't know how strong you are."

Peter put his thumb to the electric button and kept it there. " A bottle of champagne and a couple of glasses, Perkins," he said when the man came in. " We'll drink their health, Alex."

He filled the glasses till the bubbles danced level with the brim.

" Long life and happiness to both," Alex cried as he raised the glass to his lips.

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"I wish Beck were here," Peter said as he put his glass down. "You remember our last talk together?"

"When he said your life was insured for twenty-one years?"

"From the birth of my boy, from to-night. I hope the youngster will live to hear the secret. Alex, it is such a queer little old scrap! One can hardly fancy that little morsel of red flesh growing into a man. Birth and death are rum things; I don't know which is the queerer, the way we come into the world or the way we go out of it."

"You are in no hurry out of it," said Alex, smiling.

"I want to live for ever. I'm the happiest man alive. I didn't think any one could be so happy."

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CHAPTER XIV

A MOTIVELESS MURDER

WHAT a wonderful place this old world would be if happiness would last; no one would want to go to heaven. Even as it is, few people are in a hurry to go there. The next morning came the news that Lady Tresham had caught puerperal fever; her wretched husband was flung back into a state of acute anxiety, and the wonderful baby wholly forgotten.

"There is no cause for alarm," Dr. Andrews said, "care and quiet is what she wants. I never really hoped that Lady Tresham would be able to nurse her baby. I don't approve of wet nurses. That good creature, Mrs. Reddington, has taken charge of it, an experienced woman; it will be quite safe in her hands."

The nursery was established at the other side of the house, as the doctor insisted that the mother must be kept absolutely quiet, or he could not answer for the consequences. "Your lordship need not feel the least anxious about the boy," he said. His lordship didn't. All his anxiety, a large stock, was reserved for the mother.

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He loitered about the house like a lumbering shadow; forbidden his wife's room, he would tiptoe to the door for news. His heart went up and down with the fluctuations of the thermometer. On that awful night when it stood at a hundred and four the big man completely collapsed. He could neither eat nor drink nor smoke, but lay all night inert as a log in his great chair, staring into the fireless grate, while the long hours went slowly by, and all the time Alex sat with him.

Towards morning good news came, the thermometer went slowly down to a hundred and three, to a hundred and two: the fevered patient, whose thin hands had been restlessly fingering at the bedclothes, fell into a peaceful sleep, and for the first time for a week lay quite still.

When she awoke her first word was for her child, she wanted him brought to the bedside, but this the doctor had forbidden. He was quite well, she was told, in a day or so she would see him, and with this she was content and slept. Her husband, stealing into the darkened room, was allowed to look at the still white face and went away with a dancing heart, for Dr. Andrews assured him all danger was passed.

That night he slept soundly and was still asleep when a hurried knock came to his door, and had him wide awake in a second. Before he could say "Come in," his man's frightened face at the door chilled his heart with sudden fear.

"My wife?" he cried, leaping out of bed.

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"Not that, my lord," answered the man quickly, as if glad to soften the bad news, "her ladyship is well. It's the nurse, Mrs. Reddington; Bessie, the maid, found her when she went into the nursery this morning. I thought it my duty to come to tell your lordship at once."

"Tell me what, man? Speak out," cried Peter. He was pulling on his clothes quickly as he spoke. "What about Mrs. Reddington?"

"She's dead, my lord," stammered the man as if the words were jerked out of him by his master's impatience, "murdered, my lord, by some person or persons unknown. When Bessie came in this morning she found——"

But Peter did not wait for the rest. He thrust his bare feet into his slippers and rushed along the corridor and up the stairs to the roomy nursery, where he had seen his boy asleep in the motherly arms of Mrs. Reddington the day before.

In the big, bright room, with its row of windows looking out over the lawn, was an ominous silence. Peter went straight to the bassinet in its corner and drew the lace curtains aside; the tiny red face lay still on the pillow, the baby was sound asleep. But as Peter glanced aside at the grandfather's chair beside the cradle, he realised with a shudder that the nurse slept sounder still.

The woman lay limp, her head hanging sideways over the arm of her chair. The murderer had not thought it worth while to loosen the silk handkerchief knotted tight about her throat.

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Peter stood speechless, aghast, his whole soul chilled at the wanton butchery. In the course of her useful, cheery life the kindly old creature had never injured a soul. Only yesterday, it seemed only an hour ago, he had seen and spoken to her as she held his boy to be kissed in her strong motherly arms. She had been full of life as he was, robust, cheerful life, and now she was that huddled, lifeless heap in the chair.

Again he turned to the cradle, where the baby still slept on, as doubtless it had slept while its nurse had been done to death beside it. Peter's first thought, selfish it may be, was that the tragedy must be kept from his wife.

Turning to the door, he saw Perkins and Bessie, the maid who had found the body, standing close together for mutual support and comfort. All the fresh colour was gone out of the girl's rosy face, she was trembling so that she could hardly stand.

"Perkins," Peter said, "call Dr. Andrews,"—for the last week or so Dr. Andrews had slept in the house. "Mind, not a word of this to any one for the present; above all, her ladyship must not know."

"When did you find her?" he asked the girl, who stood still trembling at the doorway deserted by her ally. "Come here, there is nothing to be afraid of." She took one staggering step in his direction and stopped short, her hand on her bosom. "The poor little devil has got the deuce of a fright," he thought pityingly. "Never mind,

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now, run away to the housekeeper and tell her to give you a glass of wine, then lie down till you feel better."

He himself set the body straight in the chair, and was still striving to unfasten the handkerchief, which was tied in a hard knot, when the doctor came into the room.

"A terrible business, my lord," he whispered in a shaken voice; "your man has just told me. Yes, life is wholly extinct, four or five hours ago, I should say, but it is hard to be sure on the point. What could have been the motive for the crime?"

"That is what we have to find out," his lordship said, "if we can."

But they couldn't. There seemed to be no answer to the riddle, though Beck, who had come down on an early train at a wire from his friend, joined in an attempt to solve it.

The new nurse insisted on a new room. "I wouldn't stay here," she said, "for all the money there ever was, nor let his little lordship neither. There's murder in the air of the place."

Somewhat the same thought was in the minds of the three men as they searched the big, silent nursery for some trace of the murderer. Mystery seemed to pervade the place; the ghost of the dead woman was there, though the body was gone.

It was easy enough to see how the murder had been committed. The windows were all shut and fastened on the inside, the murderer had come

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through the door. The nurse had sat with her back to it, so it was quite simple to creep up behind, slip the handkerchief over her head and draw the noose tight; there would be no scream. It was the motive of the crime that puzzled them all.

On the floor close to the chair Beck found half a big grey pearl. "There was a woman in it," he said; "this came from a woman's trinket, a ring or a brooch."

"Hardly," objected Alex. "Why drag a woman into it when one man could do the job so easily?"

"This came from a woman's ornament," persisted Beck, "men don't wear split pearls. It makes the savagery more horrible to think it was a woman's handiwork." Beck put the pearl carefully in his purse.

"Do you think it was the old gang?" Peter asked with something like horror in his voice.

"Looks like it," Beck answered; "it is much the same kind of job."

"No, it isn't," objected Alex; "there is no motive here, no hint of a motive, so far as I can see. That pack of hell hounds could have no motive in hurting the child. Quite the contrary, as you yourself pointed out, Beck, if they are still after the rubies they'll want him to live until he is twenty-one, anyhow. This woman, Mrs. Reddington, was a splendid nurse, I heard the doctor say so, and she was devoted to the child. Why should they want to kill her? What possible motive could they have for it?"

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"That's what I mean to find out," said Beck, "that and other things."

"If you can," corrected Peter.

"Not can, but will," persisted Beck. "I will catch the devil who did this or die for it."

"It would be a cold comfort for your friends, old chap," said Alex, laying his hand affectionately on his shoulder, "if you should 'die for it.'"

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CHAPTER XV

LORD TWICKHAM

"LOOK, Alex, what Twickham writes," said Peter, a few months later, as the three men sat dawdling over a late breakfast, and he tossed a letter across the table to him. "What do you think of that?"

"That" was a thick sheet of notepaper, almost cardboard, the writing stiff and large and very legible—

"DEAR TRESHAM," the letter ran,

"Just back yesterday and heard you have had a peck of trouble. Now, look here, if you want to put me off for the first do it, I won't mind, but I have another plan to suggest. What about sending the wife and kid to my place for a while? Rosalind will be delighted to look after them, and your wife will be less likely to hear of that horrible business of the nurse, which Rosalind tells me you have managed to keep from her; besides, there is the change of air and all that kind of thing.

"If that suits I could come to you for the partridge, and the four of us—I hear Beck and

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Belton are with you—would be a very comfortable bachelor party, and we could get another gun or two if we want them. Afterwards you can come over here with me.

"Yours ever,
"TWICKHAM."

"First-class, it seems to me," said Alex, "but I'm afraid I can't be here for the shooting."

"Why not, pray?"

"Because I must go home some time. What's the use of being a householder if I don't? I haven't been home for more than six months."

"A fortnight more won't hurt. I say, you don't like Twickham, Alex?"

"Oh, I like him well enough. He's just a trifle too mysterious and melodramatic for my taste, and I never know whether I should make him the hero or villain of the piece. Well, I'll stay if you really want me to make up the number, but you must run me over some day to The Hazels to see if the roof is still on."

The Hazels was Alex's little place about fifty miles from Rockhurst, a delightful house, delightfully situated, where his friends testified in chorus that "he did you the very best." There were no hazels there when he bought the place, but he had planted them, in self-defence, he said, along the bank of the best trout stream in the county which swirled by at the foot of the lawn.

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"And you, Beck," asked Peter, "you will stay on?"

"Delighted. There is no man I know interests me more than Twickham, not to talk at all of the partridge."

The story pauses for a moment's explanation. Viscount Twickham was the husband of Rosalind, who, it may be remembered, dined on the day the three musketeers "swore that oath" and who was the "dearest friend in the world" of Lady Tresham.

Twickham was what might be called a motor neighbour, for his place, The Grey Priory, was a little more than fifty miles away, about the same distance as The Hazels, but in an opposite direction. The house had been deserted, almost derelict, till the owner married about a year before. For many years, indeed since he came into the title and big house and small estate that went with it, he had been emphatically a wanderer, and his enemies said a ne'er-do-well, with his centre in London and his radii to the remotest corners of the globe. But when he had picked up his wife, the American heiress, Rosalind Vanderstock, he had—more or less—settled down.

The great rambling house was habilitated, redecorated and refurnished. The electric instalment especially was superb, and the place was full of wonderful heirlooms which, in spite of their poverty, the Twickhams had kept together.

Before his marriage his lordship had spent money

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with both hands, and no one knew where it came from. He had hunted big game on four continents, he ran a West End Theatre at a heavy loss, but his latest craze, two years old, was the pursuit of precious stones, of which he was an unrivalled judge. When last heard of, it may be remembered, he was hunting in Paris a unique black pearl which he wanted to complete a unique necklace which he had got together—with her own money—for his wife.

During all those wandering years Lord Twickham, who was a great favourite with the old Lord Tresham and very much in his confidence, had never missed the first fortnight of the partridge shoot at Rockhurst, which was regarded by experts as about the best in all England.

Lord Twickham came to Rockhurst, and Lady Tresham went to The Grey Priory as was arranged. She was delighted at the chance of showing her treasure to her friend. Of all forms of prides there is none so absorbing as the pride of a mother in her first baby. It is her own, her very own, dearer a thousand times than herself. She finds in it a thousand perfections present and prospective, to which the eyes of the uninitiated are wholly blind. Lady Tresham had a sympathetic fellow worshipper in Rosalind, who was expecting at no distant date a still more precious treasure of her own.

Four men sat to dinner in the small dining-room

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at Rockhurst on the 29th August. Three of them we already know, as far as appearances go. Lord Twickham justified Alex Belton's description of the hero of the melodrama—or the villain. More than common tall, he stood six feet three in his stockings, and broad beyond proportion. His shirt front was a yard across with a black diamond in its centre. His eyes, which were deep-set close to the great beak of a nose, were brighter than his diamond and almost as black, but a strange, reddish-brown fire shone in their depths in moments of excitement.

Two other " guns " were to make up the party, but they were just " guns " and nothing else, and were not expected till the night before the shoot. The partridge topic was exhausted before dinner was half over. The reports were too monotonously good to be interesting, the birds had never been stronger or more plentiful, they were sure of fine sport, and there was nothing at all to grumble at. Before dessert had come on the table the three men were discussing the mysterious murder of the child's nurse, and from that topic the talk naturally wandered on to the other murders and to Peter's arrest and escape.

Lord Twickham, who, as he was careful to explain, only heard shreds and scraps of the exciting story, listened in absorbed silence while Alex gave him the full details, the red in his dark eyes glowing like smouldering coals.

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"I'd like to be in that oath too, if I might," he said, when Alex came to an end. "By God, I'd like to have my fingers on the windpipe of the principal villain."

"No, you don't," said Alex sharply. "Three is a lucky number; we'll stick to it. Three is company, four is none. If you want to score in this match, Twickham, you must score off your own bat."

"All right, old man," said Twickham, with a rare smile that lit up his dark face, "have it your own way, but I'm bound to be in this business on one side or the other."

"That's not a happy way of putting it," put in Beck quietly. He had hardly spoken at all during the evening, but had sat watching Alex and Twickham alternately as one talked and the other listened.

"On one side or the other!" echoed Alex. "There are only two sides: 'He that is not with me is against me.'"

Twickham laughed out a mellow, good-humoured laugh. "Oh, well," he said lightly, "you know what I mean."

"I fancy I do," replied Beck.

Early on the "first" the four men and the two "guns" came down the high stone steps of Rockhurst on their way to the turnips and stubble, about a mile, or a little more than a mile, from the house. All six were in that buoyant good-humour that a

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good breakfast, a glorious day, and the prospect of excellent sport were calculated to inspire. There had been a little frost overnight, and some memory of it still tingled in the light wind tempering the bright sunshine.

The two "guns" come into the story and go out again for ever in a few pages; there is no need for a formal introduction. One of the two was a young officer, a good shot and very keen—too keen, in point of fact, as shall presently appear.

The shoot was over dogs, for the old Earl had a hearty contempt for drives, which Peter inherited. "I don't see the fun," he said, the night before, "of sitting all day on a camp stool and just blazing away. I'd sooner shoot without a gun than without dogs—oh yes, that's nonsense all right, but it's true all the same."

Four brace of Irish red setters were of the party, beautiful beasts with soft brown eyes, feathery tails, and legs fringed from shoulder to foot with rich red silk that shone in the sunshine. At the edge of a wide turnip field they were unleashed by a keeper and went off at an easy gallop, plunging lightly, flashing gleams, through the dark green sea of shaken leaves.

The foremost of the lot was suddenly transformed into a beautiful statue of a dog, rigid as marble, with one paw raised, his feathery tail standing stiff out over the turnip-tops, and a second afterwards the other three were turned to stone, one twisted

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in a half hoop as he was struck motionless, and all with their noses pointing in the same direction.

"Steady," whispered the gamekeeper as he crept up and petted the glossy flank of the nearest dog, "good dog, steady."

With queer little stiff jerks like machines on springs the hinder dogs began to move towards their leader, who stood stock still with his nostrils quivering, and the six "guns"—they were all "guns" now—in an open half-circle crept on behind them.

Peter was on the right-hand end of the semicircle and at the left was the young officer, full of excitement. He had thrown away his cigar, his gun was halfway to his shoulder and his finger within the guard touching the trigger. Close beside him Lord Twickham smoked as coolly as in the smoking-room after dinner. Nearer and nearer they stole up in the dead silence. Whirr! Whirr! Ten yards away from the foremost dog a covey of a dozen birds jumped into the sunshine, shaking the air with the flurry of their swift flight. Bang! Bang! Bang! Half a dozen of the birds dropped back into the stubble.

The young officer had his first bird down the very instant it showed over the turnip-tops. A bird rose a shade after the covey, and, instead of following in their flight, wheeled close to the ground from left to right back past the half-circle of guns.

The muzzle of the young officer's gun wheeled

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after him, and just as Peter came in line with the low-flying bird he pulled the trigger. But Lord Twickham's gun struck his and flung up the barrel the very instant he fired, and Peter brought the bird down as it went past him like a bullet.

"D——n you, sir, what do you mean by that?" shouted Lord Twickham in a towering rage to the too-eager sportsman, who stood trembling with shame and fear.

"Hallo, hallo, what's the matter now?" interposed their host in high good-humour at his hard shot; he was the only one who had not seen his own narrow escape. "What the deuce are you grousing about, Twickham? Did Keating take your bird? Keep your hair on, old man; such things will happen in the best regulated parties. Why, what the deuce are you all staring at? What's the matter with me?"

"You're alive," said Alex, with a forced laugh, but his face was as pale as a ghost, "and you were near not being. You've had about the closest squeak ever a man had for his life. See!"

He plucked off Peter's cap and held it against the sunlight. There were three pin-pricks in it, little points of yellow light where the lowest grains of the charge had gone through. "If Twickham had not thrown up Keating's gun—the quickest thing I ever saw—you'd be as dead as the deadest of those partridge."

"I don't know what to say," stammered the

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wretched boy, he was little more than a boy; it was to Twickham he spoke, not Peter. "You are right, sir, I'm a d——d awkward young fool and not to be trusted with a gun in my hand."

But all the anger went out of Twickham as he looked at that pitiful young face overclouded with shame and remorse. The kindly smile shone in his dark eyes as he laid a strong hand on the lad's shoulder.

"It is I should beg your pardon, my boy," he said, "for the way I spoke to you. I was excited for the moment. Never fret, man, all's well that ends well. The thing happens to every man, once in his life. I was near shooting my best friend in South Africa, took the tip off his ear with a bullet. You've had a cheap lesson and one you are not likely to forget."

The young fellow, though much comforted, wanted to go straight home—"He wasn't fit," he said, "to shoot in company"—but Peter wouldn't hear of it and Twickham backed him up.

For the rest of the day young Keating fired last of the party. But of the sixty-two brace carried home he had eighteen, the biggest total to his own gun, and worshipped Lord Twickham to the end of his days.

As Beck and Belton went up to dress for dinner by different stairs, they met on the landing where the unhappy valet had been killed or had killed himself.

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"A curious thing has just struck me," said Alex: "if Twickham had not been so quick in throwing up that young fool's gun the secret of the rubies would have died to-day with poor Peter."

"What exactly do you mean by that?" asked Beck.

"Oh, nothing," he answered, and went on to his room.

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CHAPTER XVI

THE BLACK PEARLS

At the end of the stipulated fortnight Lord Twickham carried them all back with him to Grey Priory, and Peter found his wife blooming like a flower in the sunshine. Motherhood had given her a new beauty. Never to her husband's eyes had she looked so lovely, not even when he had worshipped in the fervour of first love.

She met him in the wide hall, and after one kiss of welcome, had hurried him off to gloat with her over their treasure. He could not tell if the brightness in her eyes were laughter or tears or both as she bent over the cot in the nursery, drew the curtain aside and showed him his boy.

The baby had changed since he had seen it last, nearly a month ago, it had something like a face now, and Peter fancied he could even detect a gleam of dawning intelligence in the large bright beads which still served it for eyes.

But faith failed to carry him as far as the mother, and he timidly hinted the baby was not quite unique. "Nonsense," she said, "he's not the least like other babies, he's a perfect beauty. He has my eyes, but the nose and chin are yours exactly."

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With meek obedience he kissed it on the forehead without waking it, and then kissed his glowing and dimpling wife with so much more enthusiasm that she blushed, and escaped as shyly as an hour-old bride from his ardent embraces.

The company had already begun to gather before the Tresham party arrived, and three days later the great house was full of life and noise and laughter, while the absorbing question of theatricals and performers was being discussed.

Alex Belton especially was gay as a schoolboy home for the holidays. He and Twickham had grown better and better friends during their fortnight together in the turnip fields and stubble. The long, lazy companionable nights afterwards when they lounged and smoked and played desultory games of billiards and cards, in which Alex almost invariably had the worst of it, all made for friendship.

When at the fortnight's end Twickham pressed him to go on to Grey Priory to assist in the theatricals, there was no talk of the desertion of "The Hazels," he just jumped at the invitation. Here he was now in the thick of it, bubbling over with good-humour, the very centre and focus of the fun and excitement, flattered, petted and deferred to by a bevy of charming, chattering girls by reason of his high reputation as an amateur performer.

It was at his suggestion that Sheridan's play *The Rivals* was selected, and a score of acting

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copies ordered from London. But when it came to fixing the caste he declined with thanks.

"Prudence is the better part of valour," he declared. "I'm not looking for trouble; I don't want every girl who isn't Lydia Languish to tear my eyes out. Let the ladies settle it amongst themselves."

"I have it," cried the gay little hostess—all this took place in the pink drawing-room during a full attendance of the company at afternoon tea—"I have it. We will hold a meeting and vote; there is plenty of time while the men are after-dinnering."

"You may stay as long as you like to-night, Hugh," she said that evening, with a smile for her big husband, who was standing at the door as she swept her rustling flock out before her from the dining-room; "we don't want you; women must work that men may play, isn't that the way the song goes? I reckon I'll have my work cut out for me," she added to her special friend on the stairs. "They all want to play the same part. Hugh will just sit there chattering and smoking while I'm torn to pieces. Oh, the men have the best of everything. Hugh has a nice, little, hardworking wife, while I have a big, lazy, good-for-nothing husband."

There were two suffragettes amongst the party, and everything was done in proper Parliamentary form in the pink drawing-room, where the ladies were assembled. First the little hostess was solemnly moved to the chair and given a small table to sit at, a jug of water and a paper-knife

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"to rap silence" as the youngest of the two suffragettes explained.

A youngish lady, whose fair hair was in exuberant little ringlets all round her forehead, but was otherwise quite smooth and undemonstrative, proposed Mr. Alexander Belton for the part of Captain Absolute. The young lady had played twice before in theatricals, and she made it plain that there was no doubt on her mind who should play Lydia Languish to Mr. Belton's Captain Absolute. Her stout mother seconded the notion, which was carried by acclamation.

"What about Lord Twickham for Sir Lucius O'Trigger?" said Lady Tresham.

"Order, order," cried the chairwoman delightedly, dinting the polished surface of the table with hard raps of the paper-knife. "Order, order, Carrie. There is nothing before the chair. Have you any motion to propose, Lady Tresham?"

"I propose Lord Twickham for Sir Lucius."

"He is too big," objected the chairwoman with a sudden lapse of dignity. "I'm sure he'd just burst up any part you'd put him into."

But it was decided that Sir Lucius O'Trigger would stand a good deal of bursting up, and Lord Twickham was duly elected. "He can't do the brogue for nuts," was the final protest of his wife.

"I propose Lady Twickham, I mean our chairman, for Lydia Languish," said the shy voice of a very young girl from the end of the room. She was determined that if she could not have the

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part herself that odious Isabella Thurston, who wore harem skirts, should not have it to flirt with nice Mr. Belton.

Lady Twickham turned a delicate pink as she met the laughing dark eyes of her friend Carrie who sat beside her.

"No, no," she said, "old married ladies like me can't play the parts of young girls even if I could act, which I can't. You must think of some one else. The little innocent," she whispered aside to her friend, "but it is a compliment to my dressmaker, anyway."

"You would never notice anything unless you knew," was Lady Tresham's enigmatical reply, also in a whisper.

There was a pause after that, for there were many candidates and no one liked to propose any one else for Lydia, lest the motion would be accepted.

A brilliant suggestion from the youngish lady that they should draw lots for it was unthinkingly accepted. Elaborate preparations were made for the drawing. "Lydia" was written on a slip of paper and thrown into a silver bowl with a handful of blanks. Then with rustling of silk and satin and the gleam of white arms, bright jewels and brighter eyes the eager swarm of women gathered round the table. All of a sudden a difficulty arose. Who were to be the competitors? It would be too awful if chance should select a Lydia with no waist, or a Lydia with a double chin. But no one

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ventured to suggest exclusions. There was a good deal of tittering and biting of underlips and audible whispers, but no candidate dropped out.

"I vote we leave it to Mr. Belton to choose," said the pretty suffragette.

Thereupon there was a murmur of applause from all the best-looking girls and a storm of dissent from the others. "Can we do nothing without men?" asked the rival suffragette, who was much less good-looking.

Apparently not, for the tumult grew, half a dozen women speaking together while the hostess cried out "Order, order," in vain.

Meanwhile the men downstairs, if the shameful truth must be told, seemed to enjoy the prolonged respite from the drawing-room. The various tricklets of desultory talk presently flowed into a single channel. It was the Tresham rubies started it, other famous jewels had their turn, and Lord Twickham, for whom the topic seemed to have an intense fascination, had strange jewel stories to tell of all parts of the world, and of famous gems lost and found, stolen and recovered. With him the pursuit of rare gems was passion for which his life had been risked repeatedly.

"I wish you would show us the famous black pearl necklace, Twickham," said a guest whose name is not mentioned in this story.

Somewhat to the surprise of the party, for Twickham as a rule did not care to display his treasures, he instantly assented.

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"With pleasure," he said courteously, "if you fellows will spare me for a moment. I keep them in a safe in my bedroom with some other things, and you will understand that I don't care to hand the key about."

Some of the guests noticed then and remembered afterwards that the right-hand side of his dinner jacket seemed to drag a little as with a weight, and that he kept his hand in that right-hand pocket.

"I have brought a few other things as well as the pearls," he remarked, when he got back to the head of the table and the guests clustered round him as close as they could get, several leaving their seats and looking over other men's shoulders from behind.

"Here is a ruby cross. Doesn't it look as if it would burn a hole in the tablecloth? I got that from your father, Tresham; I don't know if he made it, he was awfully close about that, but I do know that in colour and fire it's about the best I ever came across. Here are the pearls. They're not yet set."

From a small Japanese lacquered box he rolled them out on a coffee saucer, white with scarlet flowers round the edge. They clustered together, a little black patch on the white porcelain, wonderful to look at.

They were not preposterously large, the smallest was about the size of a large pea and the largest the size of a very small cherry, but they were

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perfect in shape and gradation, and above all, their rare and precious colour made them priceless. Blackness never looked so beautiful before, the smooth, soft, iridescent glow that seemed to shine through the gems is wholly indescribable. Byron's simile " of the dark eye in woman " comes nearest to it.

The saucer was passed round from one hand to another, the precious pearls rolling from side to side as it moved. " I only want two more," Twickham said, " to complete the set. I have almost bought one, and I know where the other is to be had. I mean to string them on a platinum wire and give them to my wife as a birthday present."

He smiled as if there was some hidden meaning in his words, and Tresham caught his eyes and smiled too.

Then he was led into the story of the biggest pearl which had belonged to a famous rajah, and had left his dominion hidden an inch deep in a self-inflicted wound in the arm of the thief. The thief was shot by a fellow thief and searched and buried, and it was only as an afterthought that the body was dug up and the pearl discovered. The second thief and murderer contrived to smuggle himself out of India into Paris, and when Twickham had purchased the gem from him he had twice attempted his life to recover it, and the second time had paid forfeit. Twickham broke off his tale abruptly, giving no details.

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As he finished one of the party chanced to look at his watch and cried out at the hour. "Past eleven," he said. "How time goes!" and there was a general emptying of glasses and pushing back of chairs.

"It is lucky we were on furlough," said Twickham. "Just a moment, please, until I put those children of mine to bed in the safe, and we will join the ladies in the drawing-room, if they are still there to be joined."

The ladies were just leaving the drawing-room at the same moment as the gentlemen arrived, the selection committee meeting having broken up in disorder with Lydia Languish still unannexed. So the two regiments, the male and the female, black and brilliant, encountered in the brightly lit central hall.

It was a brief engagement. A few words were whispered by couples here and there of repentance and appointments made for the following day; then with a chorus of good-nights the ladies went trooping to their beds. A few of the men followed their example, but the majority adjourned to the billiard-room.

Twickham and his wife lingered together till the rest had disappeared. The rose tint had gone from her cheeks, and her blue eyes were too bright and big. There was in her face that curious drawn look that women are quick to notice and interpret.

"Tired, my darling?" he whispered when they were alone.

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"Very, Hugh. Women are terrible, all scrambling for the best part like dogs for a bone; if it wasn't for Carrie Trevor they'd have torn me in pieces. She's a sweet woman."

"And her husband is one of the decentest fellows going," said Twickham, "but I don't care much for the tame detective, Beck, that he carries round with him."

"Well, I like him awfully; he's ever so nice to me. He just thinks of what I want before I know myself and goes and gets it for me."

"All right, if you like him I like him. Good heavens, Rosalind, you look as if you would faint. I wanted you not to have this party, it was too near."

"Two months yet, you old fidget," she replied, with a brave attempt at a smile.

"You want a stim; I must get you something out of the dining-room. Chartreuse?"

"Yellow, if I must."

In a minute he was back with a wine glass half full. She sipped it daintily, caught her breath with the sharp sting of the alcohol and laughed.

"That's better. Keep tight hold of your glass." He lifted her in his arms easily and tenderly as a mother lifts her child, and with her cheek nestling close to his and her arm round his neck, he carried her to her room.

"You terrible old Blunderbore," she said, when he settled her down comfortably in an easy-chair in her room, "if I vexed you, you could kill me with

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a blow of your little finger. I'm right sorry I married you."

"I'd kill myself if I hurt you by accident, darling."

"And if any one else hurt me?"

"I'd kill him, sure, if I had to tramp the world twice round to catch him. I'm not a particularly good man, Rosalind, a bit worse, maybe, than you know of, but there isn't a better husband going."

"Saint or sinner, you are the only man in the world for me. Good-night, darling; you must go, indeed you must. Sound sleep and pleasant dreams to you."

But his sleep wasn't sound that night, nor his dreams pleasant, as it happened.

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CHAPTER XVII

A THIEF IN THE NIGHT

HAS it been mentioned before that Peter, Lord Tresham, was a very light sleeper? Well, he was, and about two o'clock next morning he was wakened by a queer little clicking sound in the next room. While he listened the sound came again.

There was an electric switch close to his hand; he turned it on but nothing followed, the room was still in black darkness. Peter jumped from his bed and groped for the door. He threw over a chair in his passage, but luckily almost at once his outstretched hand touched the door-knob, and he was out in the passage.

The next door to his was his host's, and the key-hole was bright yellow and sent a thin jet of light into the blackness. While he stood staring three revolver shots cracked through the darkness, and without a moment's hesitation he turned the handle and flung the door open. Coming straight out of the darkness into light he was dazzled for a moment, and stood hesitating on the threshold while the scene focussed itself on his eyes, vivid as a snapshot in the sunlight.

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An electric lamp with a gleaming bull's-eye stared straight at him. A little to the left was the safe wide open, beside it a man was standing, a vague figure in the shadow behind the lamp. Peter's dazzled eyes could just make out that the man wore a mask and held a revolver pointed towards the door. He was no coward, yet he was conscious of a sickening chill as he looked straight into the barrel.

For a second he stood stock still, and in that second the burglar had full view of his face with the stream of the electric light straight on it. Instantly he dropped the barrel of his revolver, and as Peter flung himself desperately across the room the light went out, and in the black darkness he crashed against a table that was pushed in his way and went sprawling on the floor.

As he lay in the darkness he thought, but he could not be sure, that he heard footsteps cross the room, and the door softly opened and shut. He was struggling to his feet, a little stunned by the fall, when Beck rushed into the room with an electric lamp in his hand and a dozen men in pyjamas, Belton among the foremost, came crowding from the black passage after him.

"Hurt?" Beck asked Peter, as he gave him a hand up. "That's all right. Where's Twickham?"

"Here," said a deep voice from the tumbled bed. Twickham tossed aside a pillow, and his dark face showed with a red streak of blood across his cheek.

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Beck glanced at him and the safe that stood open and empty, then turned and rushed from the room. In five minutes he was back to find Twickham and Peter besieged by a storm of questions, which they got no time to answer.

"I was round to the doors," Beck said to Twickham, as he came in breathing quickly, "front and back. They are locked and bolted on the inside."

"So you think?" Twickham began.

"I think nothing, but I should like very much to know what has happened if those fellows will give you half a chance."

"Tie a handkerchief round my jaw, will you, like a decent fellow?—it's only a scratch, but the blood tickles me—then I'll tell you all I know, which isn't much."

He was a queer, gaunt figure sitting bolt upright, with a bandaged cheek and touzled black hair, in which a few loose white feathers from the pillow were stuck. Alex Belton noticed that his feet were tied at the ankles and quietly untied them.

"I was asleep when the thing began," he said; "I couldn't even guess at what hour of the night. Between asleep and awake I felt something damp and smarting pressed against my mouth and nostrils, stifling me. It was pitch dark; I tried to struggle out of bed, but my head was held down hard against the pillow—a fellow hasn't half a chance stretched out on his back—and before I had rightly got my senses back they were gone again. It was chloroform, of course; I found that out afterwards."

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"I must have come to sooner than the chap expected, for when I awoke I saw him with the electric light on the table working away at the safe, but I was trussed up tight, hands and feet. I have pretty strong wrists"—he stretched them out from the sleeves of his pyjamas, lean and wiry—"and I strained them all I knew how till I managed to coax first a thumb, then a hand through the loosened fold of the handkerchief. After that I lay very still for a while till I saw the door of the safe open and the fellow pull out the box that had the pearls, and put it into his pocket.

"Very quietly, without a sound that a blind man could hear, I slipped my right hand under my pillow and groped for my revolver. I was afraid it might have been taken, but it was there all right and the butt of it felt good in my fist. His back was towards me and I aimed at his right shoulder, I wanted to cripple, not to kill him. It just clicked. I pulled again as quick as I could, click, click. The cunning devil had drawn the cartridges instead of taking away the pistol. The click was meant to warn him in case I came awake too soon.

"I heard a low laugh like the whimper of a wild beast as he turned with the electric lamp in one hand and the revolver in the other towards the bed. I had just time to throw the pillow in front of my face when he fired three times. I felt the third bullet burn my cheek, then I saw the door burst open and Peter there blunder into the room. He

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was a regular cock shot for the burglar with the light full on his face, and I made sure that the fellow would down him as he had tried to down me. But I saw him drop the pistol and turn out the light, and I fancy he slipped from the room quietly while Peter blundered bang into the table."

While he listened Beck was busily examining the safe.

"Electricity," he said, when he had done. "Whoever has charge of the power-house is in this job. He has turned off the electric supply to the house and turned it on to this wire that comes through the open window, a very handy tool for a burglar."

"Well, we can do nothing about it to-night, anyway," growled Twickham. "Now, you fellows, peg away to bed, I want my beauty sleep." But he motioned Beck and Belton to stay.

The others had all straggled out of the room, chattering as they went, when a door that led through a dressing-room to Lady Twickham's bedroom opened softly, and a pale face showed at the opening.

"Hugh," she whispered, "I'm frightened. I thought I heard noises and the lamps won't light. Where are you, Hugh?"

He had risen from his bed and had come half across the room to speed the parting guests. As he turned now with the electric lamp in his hand the light fell on the shattered safe and his ghastly face tied up with a blood-stained handkerchief. At the sight his wife cried out feebly, it was more a

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moan than a scream, and before he could catch her she fell in a dead faint on the floor. With a single stride he had her in his arms and carried her back through the dressing-room.

Looking back over his shoulder he shouted: "Call the nurse, Beck, she's next door; my wife would not let her sleep in the same room. Telephone for the doctor, Belton, Dr. Andrews, Harley Street, you'll find the number. I suppose the telephone is all right. D——n the darkness. Bring a light here, one of you fellows."

He got her still insensible to bed and sat down bewildered by the bedside, chafing her cold hands and cursing softly under his breath.

Nurse Elliot, coming quietly in from the next room, promptly dealt with him. "She must not see you like that, my lord, when she comes to. Are you badly cut?"

"A mere scratch."

"So much the better. I'll fix it up properly."

"Attend to my wife, woman," growled his lordship. "Never mind about me."

"That's what I am doing, my lord," answered the nurse sharply. "It is her I am thinking of, not you." Her fingers were on the slim wrist as she spoke. "She'll come to in a few moments; she must not see you like that, unless you want to set her off again. Mr. Beck"—she seemed to have accepted Beck as a competent assistant—"can you get me a little brandy?"

When Beck came back with the brandy from the

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dining-room the nurse had already fitted a neat slip of sticking-plaster on Lord Twickham's cheek where the bullet had just grazed the skin.

She poured a full glass from the decanter. "Drink that, my lord," she said. "It will get some colour into your face; you are as white as a sheet. Now sit here where your wife will see you the moment she opens her eyes."

Pouring a little brandy into a glass she touched it to Lady Twickham's white lips, and then rubbed it briskly into her cold hands. "Now, Mr. Beck, the smelling-bottle is on the table behind you. Don't look such a death's-head, my lord, you will frighten her into fits. That's better; she must see that you are all right."

As the pungent smell of the salts tickled its way into the unconscious brain, a faint colour warmed in the dead white of her cheeks, a sigh struggled through her lips, and her eyes opening suddenly saw her husband sitting in front of the bed smiling cheerily.

"Oh, Hugh, Hugh," she faltered out so faintly that they scarcely heard the words, "I thought you were killed."

"Nonsense, girlie," said her husband, "it was just an ugly dream. I'm all right."

"I thought I saw the safe open and you all bleeding."

"You mustn't bother about that now." The nurse put the glass half full of brandy and water to the pale trembling lips. "Drink this, my dear.

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What you want is a good sleep, and this will help you to it."

She drank it obediently; fumbling feebly for her husband's hand, she caught it tight in hers and drew it under the clothes. Her eyelids trembled and closed.

"Fast asleep," the nurse said after a moment. "My lord, she wants you beside her when she wakes. I will sit in the dressing-room till morning. Call me when you need me."

"And I," said Beck, "will have a look round for the burglar and the jewels."

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CHAPTER XVIII

ON THE TRACK

ELECTRICITY was a craze with Beck. The day of his arrival he had visited the power-house that supplied electricity in such copious floods to the Grey Priory, and had chatted for an hour with the mechanical engineer, whom he had found thoroughly versed in his work. To this man's room in the power-house he went now, guiding himself with his lamp through the pitch darkness and, as he anticipated, found the engineer from home.

The doors were all standing wide open, but the tools were lying about, and Beck speedily contrived to get the current back to the house, to the great surprise of the guests, who had vainly tried to switch on their lights and now found a sudden brightness breaking out in all sorts of unexpected places.

While Beck was still busy muddling with wires the dawn began to steal upon the night, turning the black to a faintly luminous grey. Brighter and brighter it grew, and the bulk of the house and the vague outline of the trees showed black through the glimmer, growing every moment more distinct.

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High up in the sky the little clouds were turning to golden plumes. Then a great light glowed far away behind the hills, the day had come and Beck's task came with it.

He had set himself to catch the burglar and get back the jewels, and already he had a notion how the trick was played. The jewels were stolen by some one in the house, guest or servant, and that some one was still in the house, for all the doors were fastened on the inside. It was most likely they had been thrown through a window to an accomplice. It was not much trouble guessing who was the accomplice, it would have been folly to bring a third person into the secret: the same man that had manipulated the electric wire had fled with the jewels.

Beck made a circuit of the house where the guests were patching up their broken sleep, pausing under each likely window to search for footprints. But there had been no rain for a week, the grass was burnt dry as feathers, and the ground was baked hard by the sunshine. He might as well look for footprints on the pavement.

The power-house was his best chance. With eyes searching the ground he beat about the place like a foxhound that has lost the scent. Close to a little tool-shed some water had been spilt, and in the softened ground he found a single footmark pointing towards the door. For a moment the thought struck him that the jewels had been hidden in the shed, but he dismissed the notion

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instantly as absurd, the place was too near, too obvious.

Just inside the door the great rubber garden-hose was curled in innumerable coils, from the nozzle that hung down water still dropped, and there was a small puddle underneath. By the weight and squeeze of the rubber coil as it was wheeled to the tool-house the water had been spilt on the way. The footprint he had found must have been made after the water had softened the hard ground, and could not have been made by the gardener who had wheeled the hose to the shed.

But if it was the burglar's footprint, what had brought him there? what had he come for? A brief search showed the spade was gone from the tool-shed, and Beck guessed who took it and why. While he watched the slow drip, drip that still oozed from the nozzle of the hose, the sudden remembrance came to him that the evening before he had seen the gardener at work liberally watering the tennis ground, splashing the dry sod with a shower which soaked away as quickly as it fell. Here if anywhere would be the footprints he sought, and here he found them.

They were not the gardener's, for they lay in a slanting line across the tennis ground, and a single glance told him that the same feet had made the tracks beside the tool-house. From the length of the stride it was plain that the man had run across the court. Where the soft, watered ground ended in dry sod the footprints were lost.

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But Beck, taking his direction standing with his back to the row of footprints, found himself facing a tall ash tree that grew by itself close to the demesne wall nearly half a mile away, and started straight for it, his eyes still searching the ground. About half way he found a gash in the sod where the runner had stumbled and saved himself from falling with the spade, and he knew he was still on the right track.

Close under the wall with his back to the trunk of the huge ash he rested for a moment to think the thing out. The man who had the jewels meant to bury them, the spade told him that, but where? That was the critical question. One might dig half an acre without finding them. The thief when he had hidden the pearls must have climbed the wall to escape, that too was certain, for the gate was a quarter of a mile away. It was nearly certain that he had escaped in a motor which would be ready outside and would defy the tracker, and which in all probability had already carried him to safety a hundred miles off.

The spade he would be likely to take with him, no one but a fool would leave such a clue behind, and this man was no fool. Somewhere in the next county he could toss it over the wall on either side of the road.

But the jewels he had buried to be picked up at his leisure by his accomplice in the house. If the car by any chance got pulled up there would be no stolen property found.

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Only in one spot close to the tree was it possible to climb the high demesne wall, only at that spot were there cracks where a foot or hand could take hold, and Beck thought—he could not make sure —that the mortar dust had been recently disturbed. Very resolutely he puzzled out the problem. The accomplice in the house would need some mark to show where the jewels had been hidden, and what was a more likely sign-post than the great tree? To the right of this tree, between it and the gaps in the wall, was a little hollow sheltered with hawthorn and covered with close, long grass, a very handy hiding-place. But if the thief had buried the jewels there he had done his work cleverly. There was no sign that a sod of earth had been disturbed, not a crumb of clay was visible. Beck on his knees searched in vain for a spade mark. Then quite unexpectedly he found what he sought. Combing the long grass with his fingers he combed out the two halves of a big worm and guessed how he had met with the fatal accident.

The rest was easy. He parted the grass as carefully as a surgeon parts the hair to dress a scalp wound, found the spade cuts, and gripping a thick grass tuft, lifted out a lid of green sod about a foot square showing the brown earth, soft from the spade.

Rooting with his hands as a rabbit or a terrier roots and blackening his finger-nails horribly in the process, he raked out of the loose mould a foot or more deep the little Japan box which Lord

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Twickham had shown them the night before at dinner. The priceless black pearls rattled in the box. He pushed the loose earth back into the hole and replaced the sod carefully to leave no sign that it had been disturbed.

When he got back to the house Lord Twickham was still in his wife's room. "Her ladyship was much better," said the vivacious Pauline, Lady Twickham's French maid, with a fascinating smile and shrug. "Oh oui," she would take up Monsieur Beck's name to his lordship.

"No hurry," said Beck, and he strolled into the lavatory to wash the clay off his hands and out of his finger-nails, and to decide what was best to be done.

If he held over the fact that he had got the pearls he might catch the thief stealing out to rob the nest that had been already robbed. But he would have to wait perhaps a week, perhaps more for his chance. Was it fair to keep from Twickham and his wife the fact that the jewels had been found? No, he decided, and so sent the lively French girl with a message to Lord Twickham that he wanted to see him for a moment.

Lord Twickham came out to the dressing-room, where the nurse still sat.

"What is it, Beck, what is it?" he asked, a little impatiently. "Is it anything very special? Oh, she's ever so much better, thanks, fretting a bit about her pearls, as is natural, of course. What is it? I can only wait a second; she likes to have me with her."

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For answer Beck showed the little Japan box with the little globs of clay still clinging to it. The nurse in her easy-chair sat up suddenly with a jerk like a marionette when the string is pulled, and stared with open eyes.

Twickham stared too for a moment without being able to speak, he looked more frightened than delighted.

"Oh, the pearls," he gasped out. "By Jove, you are a miracle, Beck. Where did you find them?"

"In a hole in the ground," Beck said. "It's a pretty long story. Take them straight in to your wife."

"Bring them to her yourself and tell her your own story," said his lordship, gripping him by the arm, "and let her thank you herself."

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CHAPTER XIX

DEATH AND DESERTION

Beck was conscious of a chill of dismay as he saw the ghastly pallor of the face on the pillow surrounded by a vivid halo of red-gold hair.

"He has found your pearls, Rosalind," said her husband, as they came together into the room. "Here they are, safe and sound," and he spilt them out of the box into a hollow of the coverlet. The small white hand dabbled in them for a moment, then feebly motioned him to put them back in their box.

"Thanks ever so much," she said feebly, and made a pitiful attempt to smile. Her husband in his own exuberant strength did not seem to realise how weak she was, perhaps he was afraid to realise it.

"Tell her how you found them, Beck," he said.

But Beck excused himself. "Some other time," he said, "if you don't mind," and he gave the husband a look he was quick to understand.

"Perhaps you are right," he said, when the two

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were back again in the dressing-room, "one cannot be too cautious. There is nothing really wrong with her, just a little weak and pale after the shock, that's only natural, but there's nothing to be nervous about, is there, nurse?"

He did not wait for an answer from the nurse, who, indeed, seemed in no hurry to give it. "We're expecting Dr. Andrews any minute," he went on; "he'll have her up and about in no time."

But a sharp shock was in store for the too-sanguine husband. The doctor looked grave when he came, and shook that wise head of his despondently. He had no warmer comfort to offer to the wretched man than the stereographed phrase, "We must hope for the best." "In Lady Twickham's condition," he said, "the unfortunate accident is to be deplored, deeply deplored. The shock and the fall would naturally have their effect, but we must only hope for the best."

Hoping for the best is unhappily a frail barrier against the worst. Lady Twickham's first child was prematurely born. Her pains began that evening, all through the night she suffered a long agony. In the morning her child was born, hæmorrhage set in almost at once, and an hour afterwards the mother died.

During the last hour her husband was alone with her. Both knew that death was on his way, that there was no hope. It was worse for the man than

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for the woman. Face to face with death, waiting for his call she was not afraid; strong in her faith which no doubt had ever weakened, she went from one life to another where her love would still survive. For the wretched man the parting was for ever.

"Good-bye for a little while, my darling," she whispered; "we will meet again never to part."

With her little hand in his he murmured for her the soothing lie, "We shall meet again," the bitter lie for him, who had no hope.

Even as her soul fluttered tremblingly on the borderland of death, the mother's instinct, the strongest in all Nature, was strong in her.

"You will love her for my sake, Hugh," she whispered, "and afterwards for her own. She will remind you of me."

A torturing memory, the man thought, but he did not say so. "I will love her for your sake, Rosalind," he answered obediently.

"And, Hugh——"

"Yes, my darling."

"Listen; a little closer, sweetheart; I find it hard to speak." Her breath was almost too feeble to form the words, but with his ear close to her lips he heard her. "Ask Carrie Trevor to take care of her. You know nothing about babies, my dear old Blunderbore." A miracle: the pale lips smiled and a dimple showed for a second on the white

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cheek. "She is the best woman alive and my dearest friend. Carrie will——"

Her breath failed for good and all. A shiver ran through the frail form, a strange change came over the face, the light went out of the eyes and the features seemed to stiffen into marble. The lovely form in which this gentle soul had lived was an empty shell, the soul had vanished.

Lord Twickham sat on with the small cold hand in his, gazing at the dead face, unconscious of the lapse of time which now meant nothing to her. When the doctor came in an hour later he found him.

"Yes," the doctor said, in answer to the look in those haggard eyes, "she is dead. She died, as I had hoped, without pain. We must be resigned, my lord, to the will of God."

The stricken man answered in a sullen whisper, "There is no God."

The gay company at Grey Priory scattered and fled as a flock of wild birds scatter and fly when a shot is fired amongst them. On the evening of Lady Twickham's death there were left only four of the entire party, Beck, Belton, Lord Tresham and his wife, who stayed on at the earnest entreaty of their host. The bereaved husband showed none of the usual signs of sorrow for his wife. Grief softens, but he assuredly was not softened by his grief, he was silent, stern, almost savage in his affliction.

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In the growing dusk, with aching head and eyes and cheeks scalded by tears, Lady Tresham was lying on the bed in her own room exhausted by her sorrow for her dearest friend, when a knock came to the door.

"Come in," she cried, thinking it was her maid, but the door opened a little and Lord Twickham's deep voice was heard outside.

"I am sorry to disturb you, Lady Tresham. May I have a word with you?"

"In a moment," she cried, and switched on a blaze of electric light. She sponged the tear-stains from her face, and, filling her palms with eau-de-Cologne, held them to her aching forehead till it scalded and cooled deliciously. She caught the damp masses of her hair back with a small tortoise-shell comb, and with just one fleeting glance at the glass opened the door for Lord Twickham.

He might have been a wooden man for any emotion he displayed. "Lady Tresham," he said, in a dry, monotonous voice, in which there was no hint of feeling, "what I have got to say to you I would like to say in my wife's room if you would be good enough to come with me."

She bowed in silence and they passed down the long corridor without speaking.

In the same room in which the young mother lay dead, the baby for whom her life was given slept placidly in a cot beside the bed.

The mysterious challenge of death to life chilled

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Caroline Tresham's soul as she looked on the still white face of her friend who had slipped from the clasp of her affections out into the void, where hope and love must follow falteringly. Very, very lovely the young face looked framed in the glory of her red-gold hair. The hot tears rushed to her friend's eyes again as she gazed, and she dropped on her knees beside the bed, and burying her face in the coverlet she prayed and sobbed hysterically. There were no tears in Lord Twickham's eyes as he gazed on his young wife, no tremor in his voice when he spoke.

"I beg you will calm yourself, Lady Tresham. I have a favour to ask you, a very great favour, and I have brought you here to ask it. Perhaps that was not fair, but I don't mind. Fair or foul I want your consent. You were my dead wife's dearest friend. Please don't give way like that, I cannot go on if you do. There, that is better." He helped her to rise and seated her in a chair between the baby's cot and the bed.

"You were my wife's dearest friend, you know that your name was the last word on her lips, and the last words that she spoke were an entreaty that you should take her child," he looked at the cot and there was no softness in his eyes, "and rear it as your own;—will you?"

"But you, you can't give it up?"

"I never want to see its face again."

"Oh, don't say that, it's cruel, unnatural.

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Even for poor Rosie's sake you should love her child."

"That's just it. I cannot forget that the child cost the mother her life."

"Oh, but the mother loved it, she loves it still, I know she does; wherever she is she loves her baby."

"She is nowhere," said Lord Twickham; there was horrible despair in his voice.

"I don't believe that; I feel that she is still with us, that she hears and sees us. Why do you say such terrible things, Lord Twickham? Why do you not cling to the hope that you will meet her again, and be happy in a new life?"

"Why, because I can't. If I could believe that I would die this hour. If need be I would spend a long life behind the grating of a monastery for the faintest hope of meeting her again. But then I can't believe; so what is the use of talking about Faith? I must let my reason guide me. I know she is gone for ever, vanished utterly as she came out of nothing into nothing. How can the Rosalind that I loved come back to me? It is a foolish dream. That poor body there is all that is left of my darling."

He knelt by the bedside, his hand stretched out to touch hers, cold and limp, and his face was buried in the clothes. Suddenly he was shaken by a storm of hoarse sobs, and such utter despair was in the sound, that Lady Tresham trembled as

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she listened. But in a moment or two he recovered himself and got to his feet, his face still ghastly pale, but he showed no other sign of the grief that had shaken him, his voice was steady and cold when he spoke again.

"Forgive me, Lady Tresham, the wrench of parting was too much for a moment. You will take the child? It was her last wish."

She nodded, she could not trust herself to speak.

"The mother's fortune is settled on her daughter. I won't trouble either you or Peter. Don't look at me like that, I don't want your pity, I don't deserve it. You are a good woman, Lady Tresham; I have never been a good man, I have done just what I wanted to do. I suppose she might have changed me, for I loved her; I didn't know how I loved her until I lost her. I suppose you would say it was a judgment on me. I don't believe it. I believe that just blind chance governs those things, and God, if there is a God, doesn't bother to interfere. I haven't the pluck to have done with it all; light and life are worth having, and I don't want to go out into darkness like a quenched candle. I will find some excitement to keep me going till my time comes."

"Don't speak so terribly," the woman pleaded, fixed in her childhood's faith that nothing could shake. "Rosalind is praying for you, I feel that she is praying for you that you may meet again. She wants you to love her child, hers and yours.

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Look at her," and she tenderly turned down the lace from the wee round face of the baby; "it will be like her, it will always remind you of her."

"That is why I shall always hate it," he answered harshly.

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CHAPTER XX

PETER'S GUARDIAN DEVIL

THE comparison is trite between life and a river, trite because it is so close. A river gets into trouble in a rough country and stumbles and tumbles through rocks and crags: in its narrow channel it is in a perpetual fume, then of a sudden it emerges into a smooth and pleasant land, and flows along calmly and easily with the sunshine on its placid water.

Just such a calm came in to the life of Lord Tresham and his wife and friends after the tragic interludes through which they had passed. Lord Twickham, indeed, had vanished. They heard of him shooting big game in South Africa, they heard of him prospecting in Klondyke, they heard of him working a pearl fishery on the Coromandel coast, of his fetching home some wonderful gems from remote India. Once or twice he was seen for a few days in London, but the Treshams never met him, nor heard directly from him for the first fifteen years after his abandoned child had come under their care.

The two children, boy and girl, throve apace

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at Rockhurst. The Hon. Algernon Trevor had the dark hair and brilliant dark eyes of his mother; at least, he had dark eyes and hair, however he had come by them. Rose Twickham, too, was the reincarnation of her mother, with lively, laughing blue eyes, of the blue of the forget-me-not rather than the violet, and hair of the rich hue and gloss of a ripe chestnut when it slips out from its rough green husk. They two had lived all their short life together, played and quarrelled and kissed good friends, and already the match-making instinct that is latent in every woman was waking in the breast of Lady Tresham.

Algernon was a slim, graceful boy of fifteen, very tall for his age, and Rosie was a plump little beauty who, though only a couple of months younger than the boy, hardly reached to his shoulder when an echo from the past recalled the tragedy of the rubies and hinted that the assassins bided their time and the desperate quest was not yet abandoned.

Peter, Lord Tresham, loved the sea, he loved to be in it or on it at all seasons of the year. About a mile from the Castle he had a bathing-box constructed in a niche of the rocks, reached from above and below by an iron ladder, with a spring-board stretching a long arm out over the deep water.

It was a glorious day in June when the thing happened. As he strode along the cliff's edge to the bathing-place, it seemed as if there was no room for death or sorrow in a world so full of love and light and loveliness. From his ledge of rock

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he looked out on a broad expanse of sea with a myriad sparkles on its waves. High up in the faint blue sky white birds soared and whirled on wings wide-stretched and motionless. Lying lazily on his platform with a cushion at his back and his face to the vast dome of the blue sky, Peter felt that it was good to be alive. A little later he stood ready at the end of the long spring-board looking down into the depths of the green, pellucid water where the waves made shadows on the white sand far below.

For a second he shirked the sharp shock of the chill water. Then with a little shudder he nerved himself to the plunge, ran along the board, joined his hands over his head, leaped out and down and pierced the deep water like a spear. It was very cold; Peter cried out once and again as his head broke up to the surface, then he set his shoulder to the waves, and with strong, fierce strokes, spurred by the sting of cold and aided by a swift current, he struck out for the open sea.

The morning sun shone round and red through the sea mist, but there was no heat in it to mitigate the cold. Peter gasped as he rushed through the chill water, straining to reach the golden flash of sunshine far out to sea.

Then of a sudden a sharp cramp took his right leg and he groaned aloud with the pain of it. So sharp was the spasm that he sank as it seized him, but he rose again in an instant, and shaking the salt water from his eyes, he turned at once, and

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swimming strongly with his hands, he struggled towards the far-off shore. But the current was running fiercely against him. For a time he made a little headway, then his arms tired of quick motion, his strokes lost their vigour, beating the water ineffectually, and he saw the white rock towards which his face was set slide slowly farther and farther away, and still struggling with aching limbs he was carried farther and farther out to sea.

Chilled to the bone and weak with pain, he could hardly keep afloat, while the strong current swept him away to his death; with a final effort he turned on his back and floated with his face to the blue dome.

Sky and sea were vacant of all life and sound as the day they were made. The waves washed over his face, filling his mouth and nostrils with brine and half-strangling him, he coughed, spluttered and went under. When he rose he had just time for one desperate cry before he sank again.

But help was at hand. From one of the sea coves that indented the coastline a boat shot out and the man in it, almost a giant, put his full strength into the oars.

Smoking placidly in his hiding-place he had seen Peter plunge from the spring-board and had watched him listlessly, as he had done many a time, striking out for the open sea. Then his attention strayed from the swimmer to a seal that slid from a neighbouring cove, its black head just showing over the water and cutting the waves like

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a boat's prow. He was still idly watching the dark speck on the sunlit waters, when a shrill cry for help rang loud over the sea through the stillness of the morning and brought back his wandering attention with a jerk.

With right hand shading his eyes he looked out over the shining expanse and had a passing glimpse of a white arm that splashed and vanished, and then with strokes that bent the oars in his hands, he sent his light boat racing to the spot.

Peter, as he rose for the third time and opened his mouth to shout, was conscious of a strong hand gripping him under the armpit and felt himself lifted into the boat, where he fell senseless and lay like a log while his rescuer rowed to land.

When he recovered consciousness he was half-sitting, half-lying warm and dry in the big wicker chair in his bathing-box. His clothes had been huddled on him somehow, every button in the wrong place. On the table close beside him was a half-empty flask of brandy, and the keen flavour of the raw spirit was still pungent on his palate. But his eyes searching the wide sea found no glimpse of the boat nor the man who had rescued him.

"A close squeak, old chap," said Alex Belton, who with Beck happened to be on a visit to Rockhurst, when they talked over the adventure after lunch in the smoke-room; "but a miss is as good as a mile. I often warned you against bathing in that treacherous current."

"And you set on my wife to warn me. Mind,

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she's to hear nothing of this. I'll be more careful in the future, anyway."

"It's a rum thing," said Alex—he had lighted a cigar and was smoking meditatively—"rum thing that chap in the boat turning up in the nick of time, like what one would read of in a fairy tale. I suppose he was some fisherman that chanced to be about."

"If he was a fisherman," interposed Beck from the big chair in which he also was smoking luxuriously, "he would have stayed for a reward; well, for a word of thanks, anyhow. Why did he slip away as if he were ashamed or afraid? Can't you guess, Peter? Can't you guess, Alex?"

"Hanged if I can," said Alex. "If it's a riddle, I give it up."

Peter was silent, but he shifted in his chair to have a full view of Beck's face.

"It's an echo of the old conspiracy," said Beck gravely. He took his cigar from his mouth to say it and contemplated an inch of firm white ash approvingly before he tipped it off with his little finger. "Didn't I tell you at the time that Peter had a guardian devil that would let no harm come to him? They won't let the great secret die with you if they can help it; you are as precious to them, Peter, as an only child to his mother till Algie comes of age, then look out for squalls."

"It is a queer feeling," said Peter, "being shepherded by a pack of wolves. I don't half like it."

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"Remember," said Beck, "you would be past liking or disliking anything more if your guardian devil hadn't looked after you this morning."

"That's right, you owe them a life, Peter," laughed Alex, "and you can't complain if you are called to pay up later on."

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CHAPTER XXI

A FASCINATING DANGER

If Beck was right, if Peter had a pack of guardian devils in charge of him, they must have been much annoyed by the sudden craze he developed for aviation. At one time he had been mad on motoring and burst through more police traps in his day than any man in England, but he voted motors tame as wheel-barrows when aeroplanes arrived.

It sent a shiver down his back when for the first time he saw a motor that ran on wheels rise from its hold on the earth, and race up an inclined plane into the skies. From that moment he resolved to fly.

His wife hated the thought of it, and Alex Belton joined with her (Beck was away on a murder hunt in Scotland at the time) in holding him on the ground. But in spite of her terror he contrived to coax his wife with him to Dover to see the cross-channel flight of young Wingfield in a new aeroplane of his own devising. It was a still summer's day, blue sky and blazing sun, with not a breath of wind to ripple the wide sea that lay like a sheet of glass

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between them and France. Facing the sea there was a crowd of spectators in a huge half circle, with ample space in the centre for the aviator seated on his high saddle between the great wings of his new aeroplane. Something of Peter's enthusiasm stirred in his wife as they stood there gazing to the far line of the horizon that joined the faint blue of the sky and the deep purple of the sea, but fear mingled with her excitement.

The hum of the engines was heard and the swish of the propeller as its sharp edge cut the resisting air so fast that the blades were invisible even to those who stood by. The wheels raced seaward along the smooth turf. With deep indrawing of breath, a sob of excitement, the vast crowd saw the great bird of metal, wood and canvas lift itself from the hillside, humming like a thousand bees, and sweep out over the sea. Even the timid woman caught the craze. "It is wonderful," she said; "I would give all the world to fly."

A full hour the crowd waited in tense excitement, and more than one eager spectator peering through field-glasses at a distant gull raised the false alarm, "He is coming, I see him, I see him."

But there was no mistaking when at last the distant speck on the horizon grew swiftly and more swift into a giant bird, and the faint hum of the motor began to stir the still air with a tremor that was rather felt than heard.

Nearer and nearer it came till glasses could distinguish the flying man high on his throne,

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master of the air. When he was first seen he was off his course, heading for a point five miles down the coast, but suddenly the great bird came round with a graceful sweep, in a wide circle, scattering a flock of frightened gulls to right and left in disordered flight, as a high wind scatters a bunch of feathers, and flew straight for the hill.

Three times he circled high in the air over the heads of the spectators, and then amid a tremendous cheer that rolled like thunder over the water, he came lightly down in the centre of the crowd not twenty yards from where he started.

The sight heightened Peter's craze to monomania, he could think of nothing else, he could talk of nothing else but flying. "It would be an eternal disgrace," he said, "for a man who had the good luck to be born in time, to live and die without venturing on wings into the air."

At a great dinner given that evening in Dover he sat next Wingfield and they talked of the perils and raptures of flight. "It was a moment worth living for," the aviator said, "worth dying for when I sighted again the coast of England and swept round over the shining floor of the sea and the swarming crowds on the hill-top, free of the air as the sea birds that I scattered in my flight."

"Does it take long to master the machine?" Peter asked eagerly.

"Not long if you have driven a motor; you ought to be able to fly like a bird in a month."

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"You could take me up as a passenger across the Channel?"

"Impossible; my machine is not built for a passenger, but I am having one constructed on an improved plan, better and lighter, that will carry two. But first I want some quiet place to try it."

"Come to my place, you can't get quieter; I'll put you up with pleasure. There is a golf links near the house with wide stretches as smooth as a lawn, the very place for what you want."

"You mean it, Lord Tresham?"

"Of course I mean it. When am I to expect you? Remember I am to be your first passenger when the thing is complete."

"Dear Beck," Lord Tresham wrote a fortnight later, "I see by the papers you have caught your man, and I want you to come back as soon as possible—special inducements. I have Wingfield—you know Wingfield, of course, the flier—staying with me here for the last week. He is putting the final touches to the finest aeroplane yet made, a wonderful affair, jewelled in every hole, light as a butterfly, strong as a steam-engine, and safe as a punt in a pond. How is that for an ad.? I am promised the first fly when it is constructed. There is absolutely no danger, but Alex is as nervous as an old hen, and he has infected my wife with his fears, so I want you to put the nonsense out of her head, as I hear you have been

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flying in Scotland. Do come, like a decent fellow, if you can manage it at all.

"Yours ever,
"TRESHAM."

The day came at last, the machine was completed, and Peter was to venture into the air. That morning at early breakfast Alex made a final effort to dissuade him from the venture, and, to his surprise, Beck, who had been half a dozen times up on his own account, took the same side.

"It is all rot," Peter exclaimed pettishly; "there is no more danger than in a motor, less; and you chaps don't want me to swear off motoring, I suppose? Of course the machinery may go wrong, but there is just the same chance of that on land as in the air."

"It's not the same thing," Beck protested, "not in the very least. If a motor breaks down you get out quietly and repair it and go on again. If an aeroplane comes to grief you don't get out, and you don't go on any more; you just lie where you fall till some one picks you up, whole or in pieces as the case may be. Gravitation is on the watch for you all the time, never a wink on it, the slightest slip of man or machine and it gets you sure. Don't risk it, old chap."

"But you risked it yourself," Peter said. "You are a nice chap to preach; you have been up half a dozen times."

"That's different."

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"Oh, is it?"

"Quite; I have no one to think of but myself."

"No friends?"

"Oh, friends don't count. I have no wife or child; if I had I'd stick to terra firma."

"It is easy to say that, but I don't believe it. Finish your breakfast, old man—Another kidney?—there is no use jawing about it. I thought you would be on my side, but anyhow up I go; it is the chance of a lifetime."

"A wilful man will have his way," laughed Alex, who up to that had eaten his breakfast in silence, leaving the talk to Beck. "Pride goes before a fall, Peter."

"Oh, I'm not proud," retorted Peter, in high delight, "so that's all right. Light up, boys, and let us be off; it's past the hour, and Wingfield won't like to be kept waiting."

Wingfield was ready when they motored over to the links two miles away. From the rustic stile a faintly marked pathway led over the close pale-green turf to the small wooden clubhouse. Beyond the clubhouse, close to the first tee, was the great white bird, the Roc of modern civilisation with the modern Sinbad the Sailor perched between the wings. Its head pointed to the wide sea hardly a mile away, and its engines throbbed impatiently.

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CHAPTER XXII

A FAILURE, FLIGHT AND FALL

THE wide landscape lay in the glow of the warm sunshine, more beautiful than a saint's dream of heaven, filling their hearts with delight. Small things and great, the tiny wild pansies, vivid yellow and purple, sprinkled over the pale verdure, the great trees that captured the sunshine in their branches, the faint blue outline of the hills, the vast expanse of shining sea and the all-enclosing dome of the sky resolved themselves into a scene of overpowering loveliness.

The air breathed softly in their faces with the faint sweet odour of the wild flowers. High overhead, a faint speck in the dazzle of the sunshine, a lark, a living fountain of music, filled the wide heaven with its song, and then dropped down, a flutter of liquid notes and quivering wings, to its nest in the heath. God smiled on the world He had made and it radiated the glory of His smile, and man, for a moment forgetting the perplexing mystery of the universe, its sorrow, pain and death, was content to be alive.

The three friends walked in silence over the

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springy turf, breathing softly as if the sound might break the charm.

"The earth is good enough for me on a day like this," said Beck at last. "I don't well see how Heaven is going to beat it, let God do His best. Is it worth while risking all this, Peter, for the sake of a jump into the air?"

Before Peter could answer Alex took the word from him.

"Let him alone, Beck," he said, "there is no use talking to him. He was just going to say 'you're another.' Because you flew he must fly. Cursed fools, both, if you ask me. You'll break your necks before you're through with it and drive me to drink and damnation." He spoke in a passion of whimsical angry affection.

"Croaker," retorted Peter, but he laid his hand kindly on the other's shoulder, "it would take more than the flight of an aeroplane to part us three. We have been in a lot of tight places together."

"And may be in a lot more," muttered Beck under his breath.

They came to the open space where Gilbert Wingfield was making ready for his flight. A tall, thin, dark-haired, long-faced man with a sharp knob of a chin and eyes preternaturally bright, the eyes of a madman or an enthusiast. Such men as he are pioneers in regions yet unconquered, they love danger for danger's sake and they open out

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pathways in the wilderness of adventure that others may safely follow.

Those eyes strangely bright, yet blind to the glories of the morning, saw nothing but the aeroplane, and searched the delicate machine for a flaw that might mean death. He nodded and spoke a hasty word as the three men came up, but he did not pretermit his keen scrutiny for a minute. Motor, wings, propeller and wire stays were tested in turn and found in perfect trim.

Peter was quivering with excitement, but Alex, who had wasted his eloquence in protest and entreaty, took it very quietly at last. He picked a yellow wild pansy from the sward, stuck it in his buttonhole, and lifted his hat to the soft wind that came in from the sea.

"You are right, Beck," he said softly to his companion, "it is a fine world to be alive in. One can pack a deal of enjoyment into the years that are allowed us, yet men are mad enough"—he glanced at Peter and Wingfield who stood a little apart—"to risk all for a moment's excitement."

"Now, Lord Tresham, if you are ready," cried Wingfield and took his place in the saddle of his flying steed while Peter slipped into a seat behind him. If it was fear he felt at the moment it was a pleasing fear that stopped his breath, and made his heart beat fast in his eager expectation of the rush into the sky.

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The motor throbbed, the propeller whirled and the aeroplane raced along the sward. Wingfield turned the lever that brought the sails against the wind of their own raising and the machine leaped like a grasshopper, but only to light again not twenty yards away. Twice he brought it back to the starting-point and twice it hopped and refused to fly. The two riders ignominiously dismounted. With bent head Wingfield listened to the tumultuous hum of the motor and his trained ear found a jar in the rhythm, an intermittent pulse that told of trouble in the heart of the machine.

Without a word he walked to the shed where the aeroplane had been housed for the last few days, and came back in a moment in a white heat of rage that changed the healthy flush of his dark cheek to a sickly yellow, and made his black eyes shine with a dangerous light.

"The petrol tins have been tampered with," he said in a low voice, almost a whisper. "I wish I could catch the man who did it. Water has been added, only a few drops, but it is enough. There will be no flying this morning, Lord Tresham."

"But why," protested Peter, "why should any one meddle with the petrol?"

"I don't know that," the other answered with curt decision, "I only know it has been done and I must get the reservoir clear of the stuff." He

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beckoned to his assistant, and together they wheeled the aeroplane back to the shed.

The three friends looked sheepishly at each other; Beck and Alex did not attempt to conceal their satisfaction at the respite, but Peter said "D——n" twice under his breath. After a little hesitation he walked by himself to the shed about a hundred yards away. Wingfield and his attendant were already busy. "I'm awfully sorry, Wingfield," he said courteously; "it must be the deuce of a nuisance to you."

The airman lifted a flushed face. "A cursed piece of blackguardism," he said; "the thing was deliberately done. You will forgive me, Lord Tresham, if I appeared rude just now, but it was enough to rile a saint. She will be all right about this time to-morrow, if that will suit. I should like to make sure before I take you up, one cannot be too careful."

"You will come back with us to lunch?"

"I'm afraid not, I have my afternoon's work cut out for me." He seemed so eager to get through with his task, that Peter walked back to his friends.

"This time to-morrow," he said. "Wingfield is as sulky as a bear with a sore head."

"A day's respite," laughed Alex. "Let us get back to our lunch. 'The doomed man partook of a hearty meal;' it always runs like that on the day before his execution."

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After lunch instinctively they passed out through the large French window to a smooth stretch of sloping lawn. The day had kept the promise of the morning, a day to idle in and enjoy. All four strolled lazily to the edge of the slope where the view carried over the heads of the trees far out to sea.

With Lady Tresham was sunny-haired little Rosie, in whose blood the spring stirred as in the flowers and birds, and she brimmed over with the joy of her young life, intoxicated with the fresh air and sunshine. Hither and thither she flitted with laughter like a tinkle of silver bells. A great purple butterfly came up from the woods and loitered among the flower-beds that bordered the lawn. "Isn't he just like a young angel got loose out of heaven?" Rosie whispered to Lady Tresham, her eyes shining with delight and wonder. Then she rushed across the lawn with red-gold locks glinting in the sunshine, to where the three men stood talking of the strange mischance of the morning, and pulled at the coat-tails of his lordship. "Cut me a branch of hawthorn, please."

Close beside was a hawthorn bush round and white with blossom, whose sweet scent lingered on the warm air. "This one," said the little maid, and pointed to a long, slender spray festooned with clusters of white blossoms and green leaves high above her head.

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He put the long spray into the eager little hands which twisted and tied it into a wreath, and set it amid the gleaming gold of her curls. "Now I am queen of the May," she cried, "but there is no prince to come and marry me."

"The prince will come in good time," said Alex, with an admiring glance at the dainty little girl. "How would Algeron do for a prince when he comes back for the holidays?"

"Not at all," she answered, "he is cross at times. Besides, I don't believe he is the kind of person to fight a dragon."

Next moment she was on her feet again, the hawthorn wreath flung on the grass, restless as the "young angel" butterfly.

"Oh, it is lovely, it is just like the sunny, sleepy day in *Alice in Wonderland*. I feel like Alice, as if something wonderful was going to happen. Oh, look, look, it's coming."

With an eager hand she pointed skywards. High over the trees a great white bird was slanting up into the blue of the sky. In a moment it was over their heads, every outline clear to their upturned eyes, the broad wings, the thin lines of the wire stays and the little manikin in the centre, the indomitable heart and brain of the machine. Twice he whirled in great circles over their heads, the still air humming with the swiftness of his flight, and there was a sparkle of white as he waved his handkerchief in answer to their cheers.

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"He has stolen a march on us," grumbled Peter wistfully. "Oh, how I wish I was with him now!"

As he spoke the aeroplane soared up on slanting wings into the far blue and darted out towards the sea; then at the sea's edge it breasted a sudden gust of wind and shot skywards at too sharp an angle, a taut wire muscle snapped to the strain and the great white bird tumbled sheer down through the void like a ricochetting pheasant shot through the head.

"My God!" Peter whispered huskily, "this is horrible; he has fallen right over the cliffs."

Even as he spoke he bolted for the path that led through the woods to the sea, followed closely by the two other men.

Down the path they went at breakneck speed, to find the shattered wreck of the aeroplane on the rocks below, wood and steel and canvas all piled and crushed together in an indistinguishable heap. Clear of the machine on the selvedge of white sand that ran to the cliffs' edge, limp as a rag doll, lay the dead body of Gilbert Wingfield, the pioneer. He had fallen on his back, every bone in his body seemed broken, but his pale, eager face was uninjured. Just a little dribble of blood trickled through his livid lips and his sightless eyes stared unseeingly at the blue sky.

Peter bent over him, motionless, dizzy and

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speechless with horror at the sight. Alex spoke first in a voice that trembled.

"It is by the merest accident, Peter, that you are not lying there too."

"His guardian devil," muttered Beck under his breath.

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CHAPTER XXIII

A PANTOMIME ON THE GOLF LINKS

THE verdict at the inquest was accidental death. Such accidents were too common to create much excitement. The aviator had taken his life in his hands and lost it, and there was an end.

But it came out at the inquest that but for some trifling trouble with the motor Lord Tresham would have shared his flight and death, and the newspapers made the most of his hair-breadth escape, harking back to the exciting incidents in the life of Lord Tresham. It was in this way that the escapade came to the knowledge of his wife, and womanlike she was terrified by a danger that was over and done with.

In vain he urged: "It is all over now, darling, and I promise I won't try it on again unless you give me leave." Her terror was not a matter of reason but of nerves. She could not bear him out of her sight for a moment; she woke in the night screaming from terrible dreams, and at last he was obliged to carry her off for a rest cure to the Continent, sacrificing the grouse and partridge shooting to his devotion.

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They wandered leisurely over the Continent, stopping at the show places, but avoiding the aerodromes. Beck went back to London and Alex Belton started for New York, so for a time the "Three Musketeers" drifted apart, and it was nearly three years before they all again gathered under the same roof. Alex and Beck had always their own special room waiting for them at Rockhurst whoever might be the visitors to the castle.

"Who's on for a game of golf?" cried Beck, the morning after their arrival, "you, Alex? Peter, I suppose, will be too busy getting things shipshape for a day or two."

"I'm not having any," protested Alex; "I don't care a hang for games of any sort, just hitting a ball with a stick, whether you call the stick a mallet, a bat or a club."

"What about a game of cards?" asked Beck. "You don't object to a flutter?"

"Oh, cards are different. They mean brain work and there is real money to be lost or won at cards. That's always some fun. But golf is the limit, hunting a little white ball round a field to knock it into a little tin can."

"Try it," urged Beck, "and you'll find out the difference. It's a game that takes hold and doesn't let go. Those who come to scoff remain to play."

"We are all mad about golf in this house," chimed in Lady Tresham. "Algie and Rosie were off to the links an hour ago and more."

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"They are not good enough to give you a game, Beck," said Peter. "I wish I was free. Evans insists on my going over the books with him before lunch, confound him; but there's Willie Ellis will take you on if you can catch hold of him; I fancy you'll find him out with Algeron and Rosie. He's hot stuff, I can tell you; you'll have to put your best club foremost if you want to down him."

"Who is Willie Ellis?" asked Beck.

"The son of Mrs. Ellis," said Peter with a wink at Alex.

"That leaves me very much where I was."

"Oh, Mrs. Ellis is the housekeeper at the club. A nice-looking little widow. I took her on Alex's recommendation."

From the other end of the table Beck noticed that Alex looked up suddenly. He seemed about to speak, but he closed his lips tight.

"She is a treasure," broke in Lady Tresham, "and makes the best tea cakes you ever tasted. She is in love with Algie, I believe; the best of everything isn't half good enough for him, and she follows him about with her eyes in the queerest way. If she were twenty years younger I would be quite nervous about my boy."

"I'll give you a game after lunch, Beck," said Peter, "if that will do."

"We might all go over in the afternoon," suggested his wife. "You too, Alex?"

"I'm there. I like nice tea cakes and I'm a first-rate looker on at any kind of game."

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"Right," assented Beck; "I'll take you on after lunch, Peter. Meanwhile I'll stroll over and see if I can lay hold of your paragon."

"Better run across in the motor. You won't have any trouble finding Willie if he's out with the youngsters. It's a small place, as you know, only nine holes, and takes three-quarters of an hour to get round. Willie has been round in thirty-three, five under bogey."

When the motor had stopped at the stile that led to the golf links, there came back vividly to Beck's mind the lovely morning three years ago when they found the unfortunate Wingfield preparing for a flight into the other world. The scene was changed, but hardly less lovely. Autumn had touched the tips of the leaves with red and gold, and the air was so still that the faint blue smoke from the chimney of the little clubhouse, perched picturesquely on the top of a little hill close to the first tee, went curling straight up till it faded and was lost in the faint blue of the sky.

Beck, the golfer, noted approvingly the velvet smoothness of the sod. It was he who had discovered the course and had persuaded Peter to lay down this private links, and he was elate with the pride of a discoverer. Nature, he had declared, had created the place specially for a golf links, and he was justified by the result.

The course had indeed laid itself out. The sand hills and the sand pits and the stretches of smooth sod were exactly in the right places. There was not

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an artificial bunker nor a laid-down green on the links. Some of the teeing grounds faced out towards the sea, others looked into the green depths of the woods over billowy swards. Others again were down in the valley with daunting hills in front, and smooth dells of green beyond the hills to receive the well-driven ball.

In the tea-room of the clubhouse Beck found a dapper little woman of about forty, young for her age, with bright black eyes, well-developed bust, and full sensuous lips as red as ripe cherries.

"Yes," she told him, "they have just started for the second round not a quarter of an hour ago. Algeron, Rose and Willie"—to his surprise she called them freely by their Christian names. "Algeron didn't want to take Willie with them, but Rosie insisted, and she is one to have her own way. They will be back in half an hour, or you could take the short cut and overtake them if you don't care to wait."

Beck preferred to wait. "Lady Tresham and the others," he told her, "will be down in the afternoon," and she seemed to brighten at the news.

"Is Alex—Mr. Belton, I mean—coming too?" she asked eagerly. Beck noticed she said nothing about Peter. "All three," he told her, "Lord and Lady Tresham and Mr. Belton."

"You will have lunch with the young people about half-past one?"

He nodded and she bustled away to the kitchen.

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In the sitting-room there were some books and magazines. Beck, left to himself, turned the leaves idly and tired of them in a few minutes. The beauty of the scene made him restless. Carelessly picking up a field-glass from the table, he went lazily up the stairs to the flat roof of the clubhouse, which, guarded by a low white railing, looked wide over the surrounding country. He dropped easily into a padded wicker chair and with the powerful glasses searched the links for the players.

For a while he looked in vain, then of a sudden over a curve of a sand hill four hundred yards away he had a sudden sight of the head and shoulders of a boy. Straight broad shoulders and a handsome head, with brown curly hair under a light tweed golfing cap. Even at the first glance it seemed to Beck that he had seen the face before.

Next moment a driver swung into the air, smoothly and easily over the right shoulder, came round and down like a flash and swung into sight again over the left. Beck's skilled eyes knew the swing of a perfect golfer.

The golden curls and blue cap of the girl showed a moment afterwards on the slope, and after her came the slim figure and dark, handsome, ill-tempered face of Algeron. For two minutes Beck had a full sight of all three as they walked up a gentle slope towards the green.

Through the strong glasses he could even see a ball half hidden in the bent while the players

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searched for it in vain. Willie Ellis found the ball, and at last, very sulkily, Algeron walked back fifty yards to play it.

Three hundred yards off the amusing little pantomime was as plain to Beck as if he were beside the players. Algeron's face was a study as he nervously addressed the ball, waggling his club a dozen times before he played. Then he lunged at it, angrily, throwing his whole body into the stroke, clean missed, and dashed the offending club furiously on the ground.

Beck saw Rosie's face dimple, he saw the white gleam of her teeth, could almost see the light laugh from her parted lips. The boy turned hastily and slapped her in the face with his open hand. At the same instant young Ellis jumped into the field of the glasses, and struck him in the breast.

Beck sprang from his seat, ran downstairs and out on the links. Three hundred yards off the two boys were fighting furiously. He was still forty yards away when Ellis struck the other to the ground. Algeron staggered to his feet, and his were the first words Beck heard as he came running up.

"You low-bred cad, I'll pay you out," he shouted furiously, caught up a club from the ground and made a rush at young Ellis. The girl came between them. "Out of my way," he yelled, "out of my way or you'll get hurt. Oh, you are in love with the sweep, are you? You want a kiss, I suppose, for saving your sweetheart."

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Her face flushed red-hot, but she kept her ground in front of young Ellis, whom Algeron, still mad with rage, threatened with his cleek, when Beck ran up, caught the iron head of the club over the boy's shoulder and twisted it from his hand.

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CHAPTER XXIV

A DISCONCERTING RESEMBLANCE

ALL three were startled at his sudden appearance, they had been too absorbed to see him come. Algeron glowered sulkily; there was a red mark under his left eye that would turn black presently. Poor Willie Ellis looked thoroughly ashamed of himself. It was the girl, of course, that got her wits back quickest and spoke first.

"Oh, Uncle Paul, I'm so glad you came; we had just a teeny weeny little bit of a row; it was all my fault. I laughed at Algie when he missed his stroke and he got angry—any one would get angry, and Mr. Ellis really had no right to interfere," and she glanced haughtily at the poor shamefaced Mr. Ellis, who, as Beck guessed, was made to pay for that last taunt of the furious Algeron."

"Anyhow there is no harm done," said Beck cheerily. "You two shake hands."

Algeron held back sullenly. "I don't want to shake hands with a low cad like that," he grumbled. "I'll make him smart for it yet."

"Better not try," Beck said with the same unfailing cheerfulness. "I saw the whole business

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from the clubhouse, through those glasses, you know. You only got what you asked for, my boy. Better shake hands and tell Rosie you're sorry. Well, don't if you don't like, but remember, if young what's-his-name, Ellis, gets into any row I'll tell the whole story."

"I'm very sorry, Rosie," Algeron muttered. "I was so vexed I did not know what I was doing."

"Oh, it was all my fault," she replied graciously. "I shouldn't have laughed, and then you didn't hurt me in the very least." She turned her back on poor Willie—the taunt still stung—and the two walked off together to the clubhouse.

Very sheepish the poor lad looked and very handsome withal, balancing first on one foot and then on the other under Beck's humorous eyes. "You did the right thing, my boy—the only thing to do; let that be your comfort. Always take the girl's part in a row, right or wrong, and I daresay she's not as vexed as she lets on, for that matter. What do you say to a game with me? I hear from Lord Tresham that you're a wonder."

"I'll be very glad, sir, if you'll wait till I put back Miss Rosie's clubs—she's forgotten them." He was wonderfully brightened when he came back to the first tee, and Beck guessed that Miss Rosie had contrived to give him a surreptitious smile for his pains.

Between strokes Beck chatted freely. He had a knack of putting those he talked to at their ease, especially women and young people, and he felt

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curiously interested in this boy whose face was strangely familiar.

From the first he was inclined to like him, and every moment he liked him better than the last. Lord Tresham was right, the boy played brilliant golf, and he played like a sportsman and a gentleman. Though keen as mustard to win, he was always ready to show the exact line to the greens. At the fifth hole he laid a stymie, but he insisted that it was not quite six inches. Beck had the benefit of the doubt and took the hole. A strong scratch player, Beck found that in everything but strength the boy was his master. The game had caught him young, and his play was an instinct, he played as a fish swims and a bird flies, and he could no more tell how he did it. Beck usually outdrove him by twenty or thirty yards from the tee, but the other was deadly accurate in his short game.

They were all square at the ninth, and at the sixteenth the boy was one up. Beck laid his approach dead and won the hole, so they came level to the last green.

The boy was nearest the hole in his approach, but Beck got down in a long putt from the very edge of the green. "Luck against play," he said good-humouredly, and stood stock still for his opponent to putt.

The light was full on the boy's face as with steady eyes he measured the distance to the hole, and all at once Beck caught the likeness that had been tantalising him from the first. The long

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keen face, broad at the brows and narrow at the chin, the curly hair and eager blue eyes and the insinuating smile, he was exactly like Lord Tresham, and it was Tresham's own slender fingers with filbert-shaped nails that held the handle of the putter so steadily.

A quiet push sent the ball straight for the hole, but it swerved a little at the end on an imperceptible depression in the sod, skirted the edge and hung trembling over the brink at the far side.

The boy took his beating like a gentleman. "You are a bit too good for me, sir," he said cheerily; "but I hope some time you will give me another game."

"With pleasure," said Beck, "but I'm afraid I cannot promise you another beating; the luck was all with me."

Every time he looked at the boy's face as they walked back together, the wonderful likeness grew more startling. It was impossible that mere coincidence could account for it. Beck thought he guessed the riddle, but he wanted to make quite sure.

Twenty or thirty yards from the clubhouse he caught sight, through the window of the sitting-room, of Alex Belton and Mrs. Ellis in earnest conversation, and he held his companion back for a moment not to interrupt them. Alex seemed very eager and persuasive. After two or three minutes he glanced at the window, saw Beck and Willie standing together, and beckoned them to come in.

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Willie walked round to the rear, and when Beck entered the sitting-room Mrs. Ellis had vanished.

"Hallo, Alex," he cried cordially, "what on earth brings you here? I thought you despised the game too much to come within a mile of the links."

"Peter and the wife will be over in an hour's time for the hot cakes," he answered; "meanwhile I strolled on before, as there was a word or two I wanted very particularly to say to you before they came."

He paused for a moment as if he found it hard to say that word or two. Then he started off with a question.

"You have been playing golf with young Willie Ellis?"

Beck nodded, and Alex kept his eyes questioningly on his face for a moment or two. "Did you notice anything special about him?"

"He's the born image of Peter, Lord Tresham, if that's what you mean. I never saw two more alike in my life."

Alex half-smothered a curse. It was the answer he expected, but it was not the answer he wanted.

"Of course you noticed it," he cried pettishly; "any fool would notice it. I beg pardon, Beck, I didn't mean that, but this thing is a confounded nuisance. It makes me so angry I hardly know what to say. You will understand when I tell you the whole story, though I promised faithfully I wouldn't."

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"Then don't, old man," interrupted Beck. "I don't want to hear it."

"But you must, for Peter's own sake you must. There, the secret is out now, so you may as well hear the lot. You guessed that young Ellis was Peter's son, of course?"

"I had a notion of the kind," assented Beck cautiously.

"It was just before his marriage he got entangled with this woman, she was playing a small part in the Tivoli. A good-looking girl she must have been in her day. Peter got introduced to her behind the scenes; she led him on, of course, and he took her out to supper and all that. Well, you can guess the upshot. He has paid for his folly pretty smartly since that."

"How long have you known this?" Beck asked.

"Almost from the first—just after the boy was born. Peter told me. The woman was making trouble."

"I wonder he didn't tell me."

"Then don't wonder, it was rather a compliment than otherwise. Peter knew you were a straight-laced sort of chap, he thought you would be down on him, especially as it happened such a short time before his marriage. He guessed I would know how to make allowances. I have my own little weaknesses—more shame for me, you will say—but they made it easier for Peter; I couldn't afford to throw any first stones at the sinner, and Peter knew that. With a lot of trouble I contrived to

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square the woman for him, and after a while I saw that the boy was sent to a decent school. I can tell you he is a bit of a handful."

"He seems a quiet, nice young fellow."

"Seems, perhaps—well, I don't want to say anything against him that I can help. He did very well at school and carried off all the prizes, but he was born and bred on a golf links and is mad about the game. I fancy it was he who coaxed his mother to come here."

"Does he guess anything?"

"Not a scrap. The woman has been straight enough as far as that is concerned. But a year ago she insisted on settling in the neighbourhood. I have a notion she still has a hankering after Peter and likes to be near him. Nothing wrong, of course; Peter has run straight as a die since his marriage, but it is a deuced awkward position for him. Any minute there might be an explosion."

"How do you mean?" Beck was always a good listener.

"Lady Tresham may hop on something. The woman's manner with Peter is too familiar. You saw me cautioning her about it just now."

"Yes, I saw you."

"I told her she might make love to you or me if she wanted to, but that she must let Peter alone, especially if his wife is about."

"And she promised?"

"Oh, yes, she promised right enough; said she would take me on instead, so you are safe. But the

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boy is the real trouble. Peter has no notion he is so like him—one never sees those likenesses to oneself, but his wife would be sure to smell a rat if she saw them, but she doesn't come up often. I want you to get him out of the way while she is here to-day; take him off to play golf, or something."

"And lose my tea-cakes—no, thank you. Keep your hair on, I'm only jesting. There will be no trouble in getting the young man to lie low while they are here. Not an hour ago he gave the son of the house a very pretty black eye; he won't be keen on an introduction to the mother."

"He struck Algeron, the confounded young cub?" Alex was genuinely angry; "so this is your nice quiet young fellow, Beck. I told you he was a cub."

"Easy does it, old man. I saw the whole thing from start to finish. I was sitting on the roof with the glasses when it happened. If there was a cub in the business it wasn't young Ellis."

In a few words he told him the whole story. Still Alex was only half appeased.

"You seem to have all bullied the poor devil amongst you," he said. "I can hardly blame him if he lost his temper, and it looks as if Ellis was on the pounce for a chance of pitching into him. Algeron has a bad time all round. He isn't strong, and I think Peter is a bit rough on him sometimes. Perhaps this other business here has something to do with that, and the mother naturally takes her

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cue from his father. They spoiled the boy too much, couldn't make enough of him when he was a kid, and now they're taking it out of him. He's got into some kind of trouble at Eton which doesn't improve matters at home, but Algeron is a real good sort at bottom, you may take my word for it. He and I are pals, and he comes with his troubles to me. I fancy he is a bit afraid of his dad; but not a word of all this to Peter, of course. I think I hear the hum of the motor. They will be here in a moment. Glad I had the chance to make things clear to you."

"So am I," said Beck, "very."

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CHAPTER XXV

LIP-READING

THEY had tea, all four, on the roof in the sunshine. Mrs. Ellis, trimly dressed, a neat seductive figure, dispensed her irreproachable tea-cakes, and Lady Tresham was enchanted with the view.

"That's the real good of the game," she declared; "wherever there's golf there's scenery."

"But the golfer keeps his eye on the ball," laughed Alex; "he never sees beyond the length of his driver. Hills are bunkers to him and wild flowers spoil the lies. The daisy—Burns' 'Wee modest crimson-tipped flower'—just ranks with a worm-cast, as a nuisance spoiling the green."

"Though you say you don't play you seem to know all about it," said Lord Tresham.

"Oh, I swing a club now and again, but I find other games more exciting."

It struck Beck that for a man in a very embarrassing situation, Peter, Lord Tresham, did not show the least embarrassment. He joked Mrs. Ellis about the excellence of her tea-cakes and the brilliant golf of her son. "Willie will be the open champion one of these days," he declared, "and

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Balfour says that's better than being prime minister."

But Mrs. Ellis had plainly taken Alex's hint to heart. There was not a word or look to suggest her former relations with his lordship. To him and Lady Tresham, and to Beck himself, her manner was very quiet and respectful, but Beck more than once intercepted a quick glance and a bright smile directed at Alex.

As Mrs. Ellis handed round the tea quickly and neatly—she was quick and neat in everything she did—Beck saw with a sudden thrill of surprise that she wore on the third finger of her left hand, over a plain gold ring, a half-hoop of pearls of precisely the same size and pale grey colour as the one he had laid by so very carefully many years ago. The thought came to him that it would be a queer coincidence if one of those pearls were missing from the ring, but a second glance showed him that the half-circle was complete.

Tea was nearly over when Miss Rosie reappeared flushed with exercise and eager for food. She had been having "a little practice with Mr. Ellis," she explained demurely. Algie had gone home about an hour ago, he had had a letter to write. There was not the faintest hint of rows or black eyes.

Beck could not help admiring the neatness with which she carried the whole thing off. He guessed now why she had been so nice to Algeron after the row, but Mrs. Ellis was curiously disappointed

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that Algeron was not coming to eat her cakes. "I had put some by specially for himself," she grumbled to Alex. "Oh, well, don't make a fuss over it," Beck heard him say, "I will bring him over myself at tea-time to-morrow, and you can pamper him as much as you like."

For one usually so placid Rosie was in very lively spirits. "Oh, Uncle Paul," she cried, "Willie—Mr. Ellis tells me you beat him; you must be just a wonder."

"It was chance, my dear, take my word for it. I'm not at all such a wonder as Mr. Ellis."

Beck, coming down early to dinner that evening, saw Lord Tresham and his wife at the further end of the room talking very earnestly and waited at the door. When they had finished he walked straight up to them and said, without preface of any kind: "You need not be a bit uneasy, your boy will be a credit to you yet."

"Do you really think so?" Peter began before he realised the curious thing that happened. "How the deuce did you know what we were talking about?" The surprise in Lady Tresham's eyes asked the same question.

"The simplest thing in the world," Beck answered. "I saw you from the door."

"You saw us talking, but you could not see what we were talking about."

"That is just what I did see. Don't look at me that way, Lady Tresham, there's no magic about it. A good many years ago I paid a long visit to

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a friend of mine called Chelmsworth, a doctor, you know, the head of a deaf-and-dumb asylum or school, or whatever you like to call it. He taught the dumb to speak and the deaf to hear by simply watching the motion of the lips. I had read of the thing nearly twenty years before in a clever story called *White Magic*. I forget the author's name, but there was a nice deaf-and-dumb girl in it who could hear and speak in this way. The most exciting part of the book is where the girl from the opposite box, right across the theatre, with her opera-glasses sees the villain discussing his crime with an accomplice. It was quite a new thing at the time, and it struck me as being a useful accomplishment for a detective. If the deaf-and-dumb can see a person speak, I said to myself, a man who is not deaf or dumb ought to be able to pick up the trick in half the time. So when Chelmsworth gave me the chance a little while after I jumped at it.

"You can guess what a help it is to me on my quests. With my opera-glasses at a theatre or a racecourse I can tell what any one is saying to his next-door neighbour a hundred yards off or more. It makes me feel mean, sometimes makes me feel an eavesdropper in spite of myself. I could tell you queer stories of things I have heard with my eyes that would make you sit up. Just now when I saw you talking about your son I thought it only fair to warn you; never talk secrets when I am looking at you."

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"I don't know that I have many secrets from you, old man," said Peter.

Beck smiled, remembering what Alex Belton had told him that morning. "Perhaps not," he said; "anyhow, I want you to keep what I have just told you a secret between ourselves; you mustn't give me away."

"Even to Alex?"

"Even to Alex. I want to give him a little surprise some day. He thinks himself too clever by half."

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CHAPTER XXVI

THE AWAKING OF LOVE

BECK'S liking for Willie Ellis grew with their acquaintance. He loved golf for the game's sake, but the quiet beauty of the links was an additional attraction. A long day with Willie Ellis on the short sod with the fresh sea-breeze in his face he found a wonderful relaxation from the excitement and danger of his everyday life.

It may well be, too, that he took to the boy for the father's sake, for he never for a moment questioned Alex's statement that he was the son of Lord Tresham.

There is a great deal in heredity; even the most strenuous opponents of the House of Lords must admit that. Instincts are begotten and transmitted as well as physical tricks and traits. It was not his features only that Willie got from his father, but a certain straightforward honesty that Beck specially admired. Two and two sometimes make five. Beck found in the boy, as he got to know him better, qualities that he could hardly have got from his father, and certainly had not got from the shallow, quick-tempered woman who claimed him as her son. He was quiet, thoughtful,

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self-contained and self-reliant, and there was a strain of poetry in his nature, fostered, no doubt, by his solitary life and beautiful surroundings. At school he had made the most of his time, and had done a lot of desultory reading since he had left it. Before long Beck's sympathy coaxed him to talk of himself. He had a passion for politics and knew the speeches of Gladstone and Bright by heart. After they had played together some thirty or forty games he shyly confided in Beck that he meant to get into Parliament some day—he had not the least notion how—and give a helping hand to the poor.

Beck's heart went out to the neglected and solitary boy. Though the mother was not actually unkind, it was plain that there was little understanding or sympathy between them, and, on her side, at least, very little affection. Lord Tresham himself completely and most successfully ignored the relationship. There was no hint of embarrassment when he played a round of golf with Willie; he was quite at his ease and treated him as he would treat any other decent boy in his position. Father and son never exchanged a word except about the game.

As the months lengthened into years, each visit to Rockhurst, Beck's interest grew keener in the quiet modest boy who was ripening into a man. He felt for him almost as a father might feel, convinced that there was a career before him, and keen to equip him fully for his career.

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But when he suggested that he would enter him at Cambridge—Algeron was already established at Oxford—the boy, after a long hesitation, reluctantly declined. Beck urged that he need not worry about the exam., three months with a coach would see him safely through, but he was not to be shaken.

"I do a lot of reading, sir," he said, "and you are good to me about books, but I should be frightened of a university."

He himself did not know the real reason of his refusal, though keen-sighted Beck could hardly have missed it. Rosie played quite a lot of golf, and Willie was always ready to coach her in the game. What could you expect? Old Horace tells us if you fling Nature out of the door she will creep in at the window. Those two young people wandered together in the fresh morning and in the still evening over the green flower-sprinkled slopes of the links, with the songs of the birds in their ears and the beauty of the world before their eyes.

Sometimes, not to delay their game, they had lunch among the bunkers and talked of other things than golf. Those mixed lonesomes are very dangerous, Lady Tresham should never have allowed it, but then she had never seen Willie Ellis, and she would as soon have thought of Rosie falling in love with a golf club.

Nor, to do them justice, had the boy or girl the faintest notion of the mysterious power that was

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creeping insidiously into their lives. It was not merely that the word love was never spoken between them, the thought of love never entered their minds. They only knew of a vague delight when they were together, a vague uneasiness when they were apart. Their hearts beat faster when their fingers touched on the handles of the clubs, and there were thrilling messages in their eyes when they met that neither could quite understand, but both enjoyed.

They did not guess, but keen-sighted Mr. Beck must surely have guessed that they were drifting through the smooth water down to the edge of the restless torrent, but he spoke no word of warning.

Curiously enough, it was through Algeron that enlightenment came at last.

Algeron's university career had never been very satisfactory. It closed abruptly in his twentieth year. He was sent down from Oxford for cause shown. The mother never quite knew what the cause was, but her husband did, and there was some very plain talk between father and son next day in Lord Tresham's own particular den—talk which left the son sulky and the father bitterly disappointed.

In the day of his tribulation young Algeron found a true friend in Alex Belton. He made the poor boy's peace with his father, going bail for his good behaviour, and then carried him off for a month to "The Hazels." In that month's close com-

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panionship with Belton was wrought a wonderful change in Algeron. His people hardly knew him for the same when he came home. Previously he had been wholly self-centred, with no thought but for his own enjoyment, greedy of sympathy, but giving none in return, an outsider of his own home, who looked on his parents as merely the universal providers of his pleasures. All of a sudden he developed into an affectionate and dutiful son, he strove in a hundred ways to atone for the grief his Oxford escapade had caused them, and to make good his place in their affections.

But it was in his attitude to Rosie that the change was most noticeable. They had grown up together, and the old rough relationship of boy and girl in the nursery and schoolroom had never quite passed away. Rosie was still to him the little girl whom he had ordered about and bullied as he pleased. Even after he had grown into a man and fallen in and out of love with girls of the same age, his thoughts still left her a child. Familiarity breeds blindness. He was too near to see how beautiful she was, and heretofore she made not the slightest appeal to his senses or his heart.

But his eyes were wide open when, after a month's absence, he returned from his visit to Alex Belton. The old-fashioned word best describes his new mood; he "courted" her assiduously, sought her company, humoured all her whims, and paid her a thousand little daily acts of homage.

The change was very pleasant to Rosie, and as

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she was no coquette she made no attempt to conceal her new-found enjoyment of his company. The admiration of her beauty in masculine eyes warmed her young, half-conscious womanhood, and her manifest pleasure in his attentions made him still keener to please.

Young as he was, Master Algeron was already well-versed in the ways of women. He was mistaken only in supposing that Rosie belonged to the class with which he was acquainted, and he learned his mistake when, lured by her unconscious encouragement, he passed from passive homage to active love-making.

She was no hothouse exotic, but a sweet open-air blossom that flowered late; a woman in form, she was still a child at heart. At twenty the sex instincts in which love has its origin were but half awake in her.

They were walking, she and Algeron, alone on the smooth sand close to the sea's edge, while the glories of the sunset shimmered and shone before them in a red-gold sky and in the wide mirror of the smooth sea.

"Lovely, lovely," she murmured softly, breathless with delight.

"Lovely, lovely," he echoed, his eyes on her face. "Lovelier than the sunset, Rosie."

There was a new note in his voice which the girl's ear could not miss—the note of rising passion. She answered with a blush and drew herself apart, for his hand was on her shoulder as he spoke.

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"Don't talk nonsense, Algie, look at that glorious sunset."

"I can't, I can only look at you. You are a hundred times more lovely, Rosie. Won't you see that I love you? I think of you all day, I dream of you all night. You are driving me mad. Don't you love me? won't you love me just a little bit?"

"Please don't, Algie, you spoil everything. Of course I love you, I have always loved you a great deal, but you frighten me when you talk like that."

"But I must talk like that, I can't keep silent any longer. I love you, Rosie, and I want you to marry me."

"Oh, that's just foolishness, Algie; you know I never even thought of such a thing."

"Think of it now. For the last month I have thought of nothing else. I was afraid to speak, it meant so much to me; but you won't be vexed, you'll be kind to a poor devil that loves you? Do say 'yes,' darling—it is so easy to say—and I'll pay you back with love to the last day I live."

The frightened, wondering look in her wide-open eyes fired his blood beyond endurance. He caught her to him, strained her breast to his, and strove to kiss her, while all the time she struggled fiercely to get free.

She was young and strong, and she broke away from his restraining arms, flushed and panting. The kiss was spared her, but the man's strong embrace had thrilled her pulses and told her what

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passion meant, though there was no answering passion for him in her heart.

"Oh, Algie," she cried reproachfully, her cheeks flushed with shame, her red lips trembling, her blue eyes bright with unshed tears. She made him mad, she looked so lovely. "Oh, Algie, I'm ashamed of you; I never thought you would treat me like that—never. You have spoiled all our pleasant times together."

"Don't be too hard on a chap," he pleaded. "I did hope, especially of late, that you were getting a little bit fond of me."

"So I was, of course, very fond of you, but not in that way."

"What way?"

"Oh, I don't know; not in the way you want me to be fond of you. Don't, Algie, please don't"—for he looked as if he meditated another attempt—"I'll never speak to you again if you do."

Master Algeron, as has been said, had experience. He saw that she was in earnest, that she was really frightened; he had been too hasty and must wait a bit longer.

"As you wish, Rosie," he said meekly. "I wouldn't vex you for the whole world. But I won't give up hope—you mustn't ask me to."

To this she made no answer. But though they were not half-way on their intended walk, to a cove among the cliffs, she turned sharply and made straight for home. On the way home she hardly spoke at all, answering him with just a word or

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two slipped in softly now and again to show she wasn't really vexed. Algeron, walking so close that their arms touched at times, urged his love and penitence. A side-glance at her flushed cheeks and her bosom that rose and fell so swiftly told him she was still strangely excited and encouraged him to hope.

Straight to her room she ran, across the wide hall and up the wide staircase, locked the door and flung herself, face downwards, on her bed and had a real good cry—a woman's solace in every mood of excitement, joy or grief.

Her mind was troubled with a swarm of strange suggestions and imaginings, so vague that they could hardly be called thoughts, rather the stirring of awaking instincts, yet so powerful that they possessed her body and soul, and made the whole world new and wonderful.

Algeron, who had roused her to the consciousness of sex, had no share in her awakening womanhood, but of a sudden and without reason Willie Ellis came to her mind and made her tremble with delight. Instantly she put him out again and made herself think of something else, but when the tumult of her thoughts subsided she found a fixed resolve remained, she could not tell how it came there, she would golf with him next morning.

Rosie had played a hundred games of golf with Willie Ellis, yet now, as she walked down the winding wooded path to the links, and the sun showered gold on her through the opening in the

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green, her quick-beating heart anticipated some new and exciting adventure, though her conscious mind smiled at the absurdity.

How well he looked, she thought, with a novel and strange appreciation in her eyes, as with light, easy swing he sent the ball buzzing from the tee, and side by side they set off to the heart of the flower-strewn dunes.

Was the infection of passion in the air? Had young Ellis caught it? He was strangely shy and silent as they walked, and when he told her how this stroke or that should be played, his voice was low and hoarse.

They had come to the eighth tee, which looks out through a long vista of hills on the blue sea, half a mile away. It chanced—are these things wholly chance?—that the wax-end on her driver had come undone. It waved a perplexing length of thin black string when she swung it in the air. As Willie took it from her hand to tie it their fingers touched, and his trembled so that he could hardly hold the club. Meanwhile Rosie threw herself on a slope of soft, dry bent, warm with the sunshine and all aglow with the purple and yellow of the sea-pinks and wild pansies. Her eyes were far out on the sea where a white patch of struggling sea-birds took toll from the swarming life beneath the surface, while close at hand the butterflies flitted and the bees hummed from flower to flower. They were all alone, those two young, untrained hearts—alone in a beautiful world.

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It was a troublesome job that tying of the club-head. While he turned the cord smooth and tight, Willie's eyes strayed longingly to where she lay smiling, unconscious of his presence, her hands playing idly with the profuse wild flowers, her eyes intent on the sea. A close-fitting golf-jacket and skirt of dark blue clearly outlined the curves of gracious maidenhood against the pale green of her couch, her cheeks flushed to the tint of wild roses, with a delicate flush that came and went, and her red-gold hair, under the small blue woollen cap, gleamed bright in the sunshine.

Suddenly, as if mesmerised by his passionate gaze, she turned her eyes and looked straight into his. She had never looked at him like that before. For a moment they seemed to see into each other's souls. Then the delirium of passion quite mastered him, he caught the girl up in his arms and kissed her passionately, long, close-kissing, in which their very souls seemed to mingle, and in that first moment of surprise all her senses awoke to the rapture of love. She yielded passively to his embrace and her sweet lips responded to his fervent kisses.

But the instinct of maiden modesty rescued her from the wild delirium of passion. Blushing to her very soul, she wrenched herself free from his arms and covered her burning face with her hands. More abashed than she, he stood awkwardly aside with head bowed and hands hanging loose, overwhelmed by his own audacity.

"Oh, how could you, Willie? how could you

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insult me like that? I will never speak to you again, never."

She glanced at him as she spoke, and the abject humility of his face touched her to the quick, for she loved him. "You did not mean it," she whispered softly; "tell me you did not mean it."

"God knows I did not mean it. I would sooner die than vex you. It's not my fault that I love you, I've tried to stop myself and I can't. I've tried to hide it, somehow, but when I looked at you just now something broke loose within me and I kissed you in spite of myself. I'm not sorry I did it, I can't be sorry. The memory of that kiss will last my lifetime; but don't be afraid, I'll not worry you again—I am going away."

"No, no," she cried; she was dismayed to find how sharp the pang was at the very thought of parting. "I'm not vexed with you any more. I don't want you to go away on my account. Can't we be just as we were before this happened?"

"We can't," said young Ellis almost roughly, her beauty maddened him.

"Well," she replied after a pause, "I am going away for a while; I was thinking of going to London, anyhow. Stay till I come back; promise me."

"I had better go," he said; "indeed I had."

"Promise," she cried impetuously. She was smiling now, and she looked into his eyes unabashed, conscious of her power.

"I promise."

At that she gave him her hand frankly, almost

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defiantly, and it lay for a moment warm and unresisting in the long brown fingers that clasped it close. If he had kissed her again would she have been very angry? Who knows? Anyhow he didn't.

That day they played no more. They walked back together to the club, she chatting gaily, he pale and silent. The poor boy's heart sank as she bade him good-bye at the stile that led from the links into the long walk through the wood. She was quite cool and self-possessed, and seemed to have forgotten completely what had passed between them. But when she had gone half a dozen paces she gave him a glance over her shoulder that set his heart rioting.

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CHAPTER XXVII

ROSIE FINDS HER FATHER

Rose never had much trouble in coaxing what she wanted from Lady Tresham. Algeron's attentions had not escaped the mother, who had long, in her secret heart, destined these two for each other, and when Rosie, who loved the country in the springtime and hated the town, came to her dressing-room to beg a visit to London, and broke down when asked her reasons, the wise woman drew her own conclusions. She took the girl into her motherly arms and kissed the blushing cheek.

"Tell me, darling—you need not be shy with me—has he spoken to you?"

Rosie only blushed and nodded, but she knew the mother meant Algeron while she was thinking of Willie, and she felt that her nod was a lie.

"And you love him a little? Say you do. He is a good boy at heart and so changed of late, and your love will steady him, my pet. For my sake, Rosie," the mother pleaded, "you must be good to him."

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"I don't know, I don't know," she cried distractedly, "I don't know how I feel. It is all so strange and sudden, I must get away to London to think things over."

"And you shall, darling, you shall," said Lady Tresham, kissing her again. "Now be off with you, for I have to dress for dinner, and an old woman's dressing takes longer than a girl's."

So the London visit was arranged, and three days later the ladies found themselves installed in the Tresham town house in Belgrave Square, and on the third day, driving in Rotten Row, they had an adventure that filled Rosie with a new excitement, and for the time almost banished her love troubles from her heart.

As they drove slowly along in a noiseless electric car, Lady Tresham noticed a tall man on a big high-spirited bay horse giving trouble amongst the crowd and inviting the attention of the police. Her memory struggled to find where she had seen that long haggard face, that beak-like nose, the flashing dark eyes, the grizzled hair and the heavy moustache, almost white, that hid thin resolute lips.

For a while it struggled in vain, then of a sudden the name jumped to her out of nowhere—Lord Twickham!

He looked much older, thinner and more haggard than when she had seen him last, twenty years ago by the bedside of his dead wife, whom he had adored, by the cradle of his newly-born baby

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whom he deserted. But his was a face to keep a hold in the memory. During those twenty years she had heard much of Lord Twickham, not always to his credit, yet she was glad to meet him again.

If he recognised her in turn he made no sign. His dark eyes were fixed devouringly on Rosie, the daughter whom he had not seen since her birth. Twice he brought his restive horse past the car and twice fell behind again before he made up his mind to speak. The third time Lady Tresham caught his eye and bowed.

"Lady Tresham?" he said abruptly, as he forced the nervous brute with tightened reins right up to the wheel of the car. "I want a word with you; because you have been so good to me I must trespass again on your goodness. Can you be home in an hour? I know the Tresham house on Belgrave Square; may I call?"

"Of course you may call. Won't you?" She glanced expressively at Rosie, whose eyes were turned discreetly another way.

"Not now, not now," he whispered hastily; "I could not trust myself here, but I must see her soon. In less than an hour can you be at home?"

She nodded, and again he raised his hat and pranced off sideways through the throng.

"Home," said Lady Tresham through the tube to the chauffeur, and the smooth running car slid in and out through the stream of traffic.

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"Lady Tresham," Lord Twickham said when he met her in her own special room, the room with the pink silk hangings, "the girl is her mother re-born; you see that, of course?"

"She is certainly very like——" Lady Tresham began.

"Like!" he interrupted impatiently; "it is not likeness, it is identity. When I saw her to-day in the Row I was sure it was my wife come back to me from the grave. My God, how I loved her in that moment. She is mine, Lady Tresham, mine; and I mean to have her back."

He spoke fiercely, like a man forced to battle for his rights, beside himself with excitement.

"You have waited a long time, Lord Twickham," the woman said quietly.

"I'll wait no longer."

"Who said you should? Why do you talk like this? I am delighted to have you come back to your daughter at last. I don't lose what you gain, she is my daughter too."

"I am sorry," he said very gently, very humbly. "I made sure you would refuse even to let me see her. I know there are queer rumours about me, lies for the most part, still——"

"Oh, you foolish man, to think of such a thing! Wait here and I will send her to you."

"Alone?"

"Of course. But I must speak to her first; remember she has never seen her father."

"Don't, Lady Tresham, don't rub it in like that,

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it hurts horribly. I'll give her now all the love she has lost through those years."

When Lady Tresham left the room the man walked impatiently up and down from door to window, from window to door, gaunt and grim, like a caged tiger, strangely out of place in that dainty little boudoir. The minutes went slowly by, ever so slowly. He was hungry for his child, tortured by doubt and remorse. Why had he left her, Rosalind's child, Rosalind herself come back to life? Would she turn from him when they met, shy, sullen, indifferent? Could he ever hope to win back the love he had justly forfeited?

A light footstep in the passage made the strong man stop short, trembling, a light hand on the door-knob, a dainty figure in pale blue showed for a moment, a radiant face framed in red gold hair.

"Rosalind!" the big man muttered hoarsely.

"Father!" she answered with a cry of joy, and flung herself into his arms.

He hugged her and kissed her and comforted her. It was wonderful how tender in word and touch was this strange man who had been through such rough adventures. Was it instinct that made her take to him at once? Within half an hour they had known each other all their lives, he was her slave, she was his queen, ruling absolutely by right of love.

"I wonder you can forgive me, Rosie," he said. "I was a selfish savage, but Lady Tresham, God bless her, has been a mother to you."

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"More than a mother."

"Not more than a father; don't say that, don't think it. My own little girl, I'd do anything in the world you asked—anything, mind that. I have a lot to make up to you, and I'll make it up. By God, I'll make you the richest girl in England; you are the prettiest already, but I'll make you the happiest. Only think of what you want and tell me."

Thereupon, in spite of herself, poor Rosie thought suddenly of Willie Ellis, but she did not tell her father what she wanted.

They went back to the castle, all three, earlier than they intended. Peter had a hearty welcome for his old friend, Lord Twickham, and the other two musketeers, Beck and Belton, who were staying at Rockhurst for the coming of age of Algeron, which was only a month away, appeared hardly less pleased to see him.

Absorbed in his newly-found daughter, Lord Twickham was quick to notice that Algeron made court to her with a quiet persistent devotion which she could not rebuff or refuse. Her father, on his part, was specially civil to Algeron, talked and walked and played golf with him and urged his daughter to join in the game. But Rosie could not be coaxed to play, she was sick of golf, she said, it tired her too much. She did look pale and tired, and moped alone about the grounds, and only in her father's company was she the light-hearted girl of the old days.

"Nice young fellow, young Algeron," he said,

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as they sat alone one morning in her own special room, "and very fond of my little girl—that's in his favour too. Besides, he is his father's and mother's son, and that counts a lot. I'll give my consent, Rosie, if you should happen to grow fond of him."

Again poor Rosie thought of Willie Ellis—he was constantly in her thoughts of late—blushed hotly and said nothing, and her father misinterpreted her blushes and her silence.

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CHAPTER XXVIII

THE TIME AT HAND

THREE weeks from Algeron's coming of age the four friends sat round the dinner-table at Rockhurst after the ladies had retired. Algeron had not dined at home that day.

"Funny your coming back just at this time of all others," Beck said to Twickham. "Do you remember we are pledged, all four, to catch the ruby murderers? We are likely to have our chance pretty soon."

"What chance?" asked Twickham, who had apparently half forgotten the story of the rubies.

"You must remember, surely you must remember," Beck retorted. "Peter here is bound to tell Algeron the hiding-place of the formula on his birthday. The gang will have their chance then to find the secret and we to find them."

"You still believe in that old story?" said Twickham almost contemptuously.

"Of course I do. Haven't I good reason to? Didn't I guess right from the first? I knew Peter was safe till his son came of age, I knew they would take care of him. What price the boat

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and the aeroplane? Honest Indian, I am nervous about you now, Peter. When you have told Algeron the secret, the sooner you are out of the way the better."

"Rot, if you ask me," retorted Lord Twickham. "You'll excuse me, Beck, but the thing is too fantastic for belief. They could never hold together all these years, and if they did they would have forgotten all about the rubies. It's a bit too thin for me."

"I'm inclined to agree with Twickham," chipped in Peter; "the whole thing was over and done with years ago."

"Every man to his own pet folly," laughed Alex; "that's Beck's."

"Three to one is long odds against me," persisted Beck good-humouredly, "but I'll back my opinion all the same. You all seem to forget that the prize is to be counted in millions."

"The gang, if there ever was a gang," retorted Lord Twickham, "must have broken up long ago."

"I say no to that. I have been investigating a burglary lately that I would swear was their handiwork."

"Burglary?" cried Lord Twickham, keenly excited. "Tell us all about it. Remember I have been out of the country."

"It happened since your return," said Beck dryly.

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"But how did you guess it was by the same gang?" asked Alex.

"Because it was what I called a 'domestic' burglary. I caught the burglar, but he was as close as an oyster, though he was promised he would get clean off if he peached, and a reward into the bargain. But he took his seven years without a whimper. Oh, it's the old gang all right, and the old leader, too, or I'm greatly mistaken. His men trust and fear him, specially fear him; anyhow, they never give him away. There are not likely to be two devils of that rank."

"I wonder he never had a shot at my rubies," said Peter, "if he knows all about them. They are worth taking, and I suppose the safe would be no trouble to him."

"I should rather think not," answered Beck, "but I suppose he is waiting for the big coup. Algeron will be twenty-one in about three weeks' time, and you intend to tell him the secret on his birthday?"

To this Peter nodded. "Bound to," he said.

"Crack!" Lord Twickham crushed a walnut between his strong fingers with a sound that made them all start.

"Yes," said Beck, as if answering the sound, "there is bound to be a bit of an explosion then, I fancy."

"Happy thought," laughed Alex. "Why don't the burglar amuse himself with the manufactured

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rubies while he is waiting for the receipt? Better late than never; he has a fortnight left."

"Touch wood, Peter," said Lord Twickham. "It sounds like an invitation to the burglar. Touch wood for luck."

Alex lifted the edge of the cloth and drummed his finger-tips on the shining mahogany. "For luck," he said laughingly.

"Luck for yourself or Peter?" asked Beck.

"For the rubies," retorted Alex.

"I say, Beck," broke in Lord Twickham again, "you don't really believe in all that rot—the burglar waiting twenty-one years for his chance? It sounds like a fairy tale. You really don't believe it?"

"Really and truly," Beck answered, lighting his cigar.

"Well, I don't," Lord Twickham replied sharply, almost rudely.

"Wait and see," replied Beck, and Peter hospitably caught up the words.

"That's right; stay on, Twickham, it's only nineteen days more. Algeron's birthday is the 21st, the longest day in the year. If Beck is right I'll want help. You'll stay?"

"Oh, I'll stay right enough if you'll keep me—I want to see as much as I can of my little girl; but I think Beck's notion is d——d nonsense all the same."

Beck still smiled placidly, but Alex interposed

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with a sharp look at Twickham, who pulled angrily at his moustache.

"No need to get so riled about it, Twickham. I have a notion myself that Beck is right; I feel in my bones something is going to happen."

"Shall we join the ladies, Peter?" said Twickham abruptly. "We have had about enough of this foolish talk."

Five minutes after he had found a seat beside his daughter and his ill-humour had vanished.

"Beck," he said as they parted for the night, "I'm sorry if I seemed rude at dinner, but——"

Laughingly, Beck held up a warning forefinger. "Don't begin over again," he begged; "we are not the least likely to agree on the subject."

Three days later, or rather three nights later, Alex was so far justified that something did happen. The burglars, at least some burglars, had a try for the Tresham rubies and almost succeeded. Lord Twickham was the hero of the adventure.

He had gone to bed with the others a little after twelve o'clock, and he was still awake reading when he heard a light touch on his bedroom door. The wild life he had led in wild countries had, he boasted, made his eyes like a hawk's and his ears like a hunted hare's. All at once the idea came to him that some one without a light was stealthily groping his way. Lord Tresham's dressing-room, with the safe and the rubies, was near the end of

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the passage. The talk about burglars must have got on Lord Twickham's nerves, for in an instant he was out of bed and out of the room. He could just distinguish a darker shadow move through the darkness, and followed stealthily as he had followed big game in South Africa.

With ears strained to the uttermost he heard the door of Lord Tresham's dressing-room open and shut, and he knew he had got his man. For a second a pencil of light showed through the keyhole and disappeared—the burglar was at work inside.

Cautiously as a tiger on the pounce and as silently Twickham crept on till he felt his fingers on the handle of the door. It turned smoothly, noiselessly, as if recently oiled, and he gently pushed the door open. At the far end of the room was the safe, a light shone on it, and between him and the light was the figure of a man on his knees. Twickham paused, measuring the distance, making ready for a spring, and as he paused a shout broke out behind him, a blow from some heavy weapon just missed his head and fell with numbing force on his shoulders, the light went out and strong hands gripped at his throat in the darkness and bore him to the ground, grappling fiercely with his opponent.

A cry broke the silence, "Thieves! Murder! Thieves!" filling the house with alarm, and from all quarters Lord Tresham, Beck and a troop of servants came rushing to the room. The lights flashed up, and on the carpet midway between the safe and the door they found Lord Twickham with

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the butler under him, pinned to the ground and yelling incessantly.

"I've got one of them, at any rate," panted his lordship as he struggled to his feet.

"Hold him, hold him!" yelled the butler, gripping him round the legs. Then he looked up and saw whom he held, his cry ceased in a comical gurgle in his throat, and he stared with round wide-open eyes and the gaping mouth of sheer amazement. "Oh, Lord," he muttered, "I thought——" and he stopped short, unable to get another word out.

"Well," broke in Alex sharply, "what did you think? What does it all mean?" But the man only stared blankly. "You tell us what has happened, Twickham."

Twickham told his story.

"Naturally," he concluded, "I thought this chap was one of them. I'm afraid I have been a bit rough with him."

He had. The butler, a big stout man, was pale as a ghost, dizzy and speechless. His pale eyes stared in hopeless bewilderment, his hair was like a dissipated haystack.

"Well, my man," said Alex again, more sharply than before, "what have you got to say for yourself?"

"Look out," cried Beck, "he is going to faint."

As the butler reeled Twickham caught him, lifted him to a sofa and stood over him feeling his pulse. "Can you lay your hand on a drop of brandy, Peter? The chap's stunned a bit, that's all."

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The man's mouth hung open when Peter put the glass to his lips and poured in the brandy. He choked horribly and spluttered at first, then took it down like mother's milk, a big wine-glass full, and the colour crept back into his face.

Lady Tresham's own maid, Simmons, pushed her way through the crowd of servants at the door. She was completely dressed and as neat as if she had come out of a bandbox, a woman of about thirty, pale-faced with sleek black hair, a prim, formal person who never spoke above her breath.

"Her ladyship presents her compliments," she began; "she has heard some disturbance, and——"

"Run back to her, Simmons," Peter broke in—the notion of Simmons running!—"tell her it is nothing; I'll be with her in a few moments. All you good people get back to your beds."

The crowd of servants, men and women, melted slowly away with manifest reluctance and left Algeron standing in the doorway looking pale and frightened and doubtful whether to go or stay.

"Why, Algie," his father cried, "don't look so scared, it's all right."

At that Algeron crossed the room and stood beside Lord Twickham. "What's happened?" he whispered.

"Hanged if I know," the other answered. "We are all waiting for this chap to come to and tell us. I rather fancy he mistook me for a burglar, I'm sure I mistook him, and——"

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"You see the consequences," chimed in Alex, cheerfully pointing to the prostrate figure.

"Oh, he'll be all right in a minute." Twickham poured another dose of brandy between his lips, and the man gasped and sat up; his eyes opened, and he stared at the five men gathered round him in pyjamas.

"Is he caught?" he gasped out. "Is he dead?"

"No, thank God," answered Twickham dryly. "You were d——d near cracking my head with that poker, my man."

"I beg your pardon, sir, I didn't mean it. I thought——"

"Oh, you thought, no doubt, I was the burglar; I made the same mistake about you. Now take your time and tell us what happened."

The man looked suspiciously from Twickham to his master. Peter nodded and he went on, speaking in a frightened whisper.

"It was this way, sir," he said. "I went to bed late, leastways I'm generally in bed before twelve unless something keeps me up, but to-night it was near one. I'm not what you would call a light sleeper, not particularly heavy, either, for that matter, still——"

"Cut it short," said Peter sharply. "Tell us what happened. How did you come here?"

"It was like this, my lord," the butler began again, and this time Peter let him go on his own way: "as I was saying, I got to bed a bit late, and

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I wasn't in bed half an hour, I should say, maybe less, when I heard a queer kind of scratching on the window pane. I took no heed of it, for I was a bit drowsy, until I heard the tinkle of glass, and after that I felt a blast of cold air on my face. It was dark as dark, and I was too frightened to search for matches, but I just heard the window open and shut again, and I knew there was a man in the room. Then there was a gleam of light for a second—dark lantern, I should think—but before I could see anything it went out and I could hear his fingers on the handle of the door as he went through, as softly as a shadow.

"There's no use saying I wasn't frightened, my lord, for I was, and I lay still for a goodish while, my heart beating fit to burst. Then I thought maybe your lordship and her ladyship might be murdered in your beds, and I lying there like a log. I daren't give the alarm and send the fellow running back the way he came, with a revolver, maybe, and all the rest of it, so I picked up the poker and followed, hoping to get a smack at him from behind."

"How could you see him?" asked Alex.

"I couldn't, sir; I guessed the way he was going. I guessed he was after the rubies in the safe in the dressing-room."

"The rubies?" Peter interrupted. "Who told you about the rubies?"

"The other night at dinner, my lord, I couldn't help hearing what was said. It was cautious

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work, too, creeping on in the dark, feeling that a sound might bring the chap with the revolver back on me. I was close up to the dressing-room door when it opened, and I saw a man standing with his back to me, between me and the light, not five yards off. I just got one smack at him with the poker, he moved as I struck, and I missed his head, but I was on top of him like a shot, we went down together on the carpet and his lamp went out. The chap was as strong as the devil, begging your lordship's pardon. Before you could say knife he had me under him, banging the back of my head on the carpet."

"What became of the other chap?" asked Lord Twickham, "the chap with the light."

"There wasn't no other chap," said the butler; "leastways, I didn't see him if there was."

As if by common consent the five men drew away from the sofa and spoke together in whispers while the butler's eye wandered anxiously from one to the other.

"The other chap was busy at the safe," said Twickham. "I would have nailed him for certain if that cursed fool hadn't interfered."

"It sounds a rum story," Alex agreed. "Walker may have been set there as a watch. Those burglars have often a servant accomplice."

"Our special gang always has," added Beck.

But Peter would have none of it. "The poor devil couldn't invent a story like that on the spur of the moment. Any one could see he's

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telling the plain truth; I'd stake my life he is innocent."

"Perhaps so," conceded Lord Twickham doubtfully.

"Let us have a look at the window," Peter suggested; "that will settle the question. If you feel up to it, Walker, we want you to show us where the chap got in."

"Oh, I'm all right, my lord," cried the butler with alacrity, as if his mind were relieved by the suggestion, and jumping to his feet he led the way down the passage, switching on the electric light as he went.

The room and its window confirmed the story of a neat commonplace burglary. A hole had been cut in the glass, the window unfastened and opened from the outside.

"He's all right," Twickham admitted at once. "Poor devil, I'm sorry I knocked him about. If I were a burglar myself it's just the window I'd choose, a convenient corner with hard gravel in front. You'll find no footmarks in the morning, Beck."

"No," said Beck, "I don't expect I will."

But Alex wasn't satisfied so easily. He turned sharply on the butler.

"Was that pane cut when you went to bed?"

The man hesitated and looked confused. "I don't know what you mean, sir."

"My question was plain enough."

"Hang it all, Alex," Peter said, "give the chap

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a chance. Didn't he say he heard the burglar cutting it?"

"It was whole when I went to bed, sir," reiterated the butler. "I'll take my oath to that."

"Oh, that's all right," said his master. "You can get back to bed as soon as you like."

"What did you mean just now, Belton?" Twickham asked. "Did you suspect the poor devil of a butler let the burglar in?"

"Not exactly that. I thought perhaps the pane had been cut as a blind, that the burglar was some one in the house."

"What's the good of making a mystery out of the thing," remonstrated Peter, "when it's as plain as the nose on your face? Just an ordinary every night burglary. I make a small bet that Beck will nab the chap that tried it on."

"I doubt it," muttered Alex, unconvinced.

"You say nothing?" Lord Twickham turned to Beck, who was placidly sipping his whisky and soda. Beck chuckled contentedly.

"Like the sailor's parrot," he said, "I think the more."

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CHAPTER XXIX

ALGERON IS TURNED DOWN

ALEX BELTON proved right. Beck found no trace of the mysterious burglar on the gravel, no clue to his identity. Indeed, he did not seem to try very hard, and gradually the excitement about the abortive burglary was lost in a larger excitement as the day drew near when the great ruby secret, the secret so involved in mystery and murder, was to be confided to the eldest son of LordTresham.

Alex Belton made no effort to conceal his interest in the revelation, even Beck was a little stirred from his usual placidity. Only Lord Twickham showed himself wholly unconcerned. Every day he appeared more and more absorbed in his daughter. The girl was troubled, restless and excited. Now and again, especially when her father was with her, she bubbled over with high spirits, her sly humour spared no one and hurt no one, and her laugh was like the tinkle of silver bells. Then of a sudden she would relapse into silence, from which no provocation could rouse her. She took long walks alone and returned paler and sadder than when she set out. All the time she

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was very nice to Algeron, talked to him, laughed with him, played with him, but only when others were by. She took care they were never alone together.

Her father, watching with keen observant eyes, guessed she loved him, and guessed wrong, and yet not wholly wrong, for the girl was in love.

The remembrance of that day on the links would leap unexpectedly to her thoughts, and make her blush all over with a kind of defiant shame. She longed to see him again, to speak to him, but she did not let her longing go further than that, she was afraid of what lay beyond.

Her love made her very gentle to Algeron, who assumed an air of pensive resignation, which he had found effective in other love affairs. The approaching disclosure of the jewel secret, its mystery and its danger naturally excited the girl, and interested her in the chief figure in the drama. Very skilfully he played his part of humble and devoted suitor, eager to anticipate her wishes and claiming nothing in return, till her fears fell away conquered by her curiosity. She no longer avoided him, and her vigilant father was more and more confirmed in his illusion.

"Are you afraid, Algie?" she asked as they were walking together down the broad central path of the garden, waiting for the lunch bell, two days before what she called his "ordeal."

"Just a little," he confessed, "but more excited than afraid. You see, I don't quite believe in those

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wild notions of Mr. Beck's, that there is a gang on the watch for my twenty-first birthday to torture the secret out of me. Even if he is right about the murders and all that they must have been choked off long ago."

"Well, I'm afraid, horribly afraid. Suppose the devils are still on the pounce. Suppose they catch and torture you."

"They won't," he answered confidently.

"Do you think you could hold out?"

"Oh, I don't know, I suppose so; I don't like to think about it."

"I wouldn't if I were you, I'd just give it up. You won't have to swear as your father did?"

"No, I'll just be told, that is all father is bound to do. Can you keep a secret, Rosie?"

"I'll try hard."

"The thing is to be mine, altogether mine, to do what I like with it. The governor told me so yesterday; he said he was sick of the very name of rubies. Just fancy, if you can, what that means. A ruby mine in my waistcoat pocket, the richest man in the world." His eyes were shining strangely; he was breathing fast.

"I don't care," she cried excitedly, "it's horrible to think of all the murders, and I'm sure Mr. Beck is right, they would never give up such a chance. They will be after you, Algie, the moment you have got the secret."

"What if they are?" he answered. "It is worth it."

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It was said very quietly, but all the same there was something a little grandiose in his way of saying it; a calmer observer might have guessed he was posing—playing for her applause. But the excited girl never noticed, full of admiration for a courage that faced danger so coolly, she was all the more anxious to warn him, to stop him if she could.

"Worth it!" she cried passionately—"worth your life? What is the good of a ruby mine to a dead man? Dead or alive, what good is it? What could you do with it that you can't do now? I wouldn't give that for your ruby mine."

She plucked a half-opened rosebud, a ball of deep red petals just pushing through the green sheath, and stuck it in her belt.

"And I," he answered, "would give my ruby mine for that."

In spite of herself she smiled and blushed.

"Don't talk nonsense, Algie," she said. "I'm horribly serious."

"So am I. Is it a bargain?"

"Oh, I don't want your old rubies, but if you promise to be very careful and get rid of them as soon as you can——"

"I may have the rose." He stooped and took it from her belt; she neither gave nor withheld, but she blushed when he touched her and shrank back ashamed from his circling arm.

"Don't, Algeron, don't. I won't have it."

Voice and eyes told him she was in earnest, and he was penitent in a moment. "Forgive me, Rosie;

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I was terribly tempted. I wouldn't vex you for the world; you know that. But I can't and won't give up hope, I love you so."

"Oh, I wish you wouldn't talk such nonsense," she said, but there was a smile on her lips and a warm light in her eyes, and he plumed himself on an easy conquest. How could he guess that the smile and the love-light in her eyes were for another?

Peter was in excellent spirits that day at lunch. It was plain that the coming "ordeal" didn't trouble him in the least. His morning had been given to golf, and he was at the top of his game.

"I've learned the right swing at last," he said (this was the hundredth time he had discovered it), "didn't miss a shot off the tee. Splendid fellow, young what's his name—Ellis, altogether too good for his job. The chap's a gentleman if I'm a judge, good-looking, too. Don't care much for the mother, though—the woman you recommended, Alex, you remember. She seems a bit hard on the lad."

Alex caught Beck's eye across the table, and his under eyelid twitched with the faint suggestion of a wink. Beck saw the word "cool" shape itself on his lips.

"I've never seen him," said Lady Tresham.

"You'd like the boy all right," said her husband. "How do you play with him, Rosie?"

But Rosie had dropped her napkin under the table and was stooping for it when he spoke. Algeron, who was sitting beside her, stooped too,

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and they were some time finding it. When she reappeared her colour was brighter than before.

Lord Twickham's watchful eyes, though he was chatting carelessly with Beck at the moment, did not miss a look or motion of his daughter. More and more he was convinced she was in love with Algeron Trevor.

But unobservant Peter noticed nothing. "What does he give you, Rosie?" he asked again.

There was a queer little quiver in Rosie's voice as she answered. "Nine strokes and a beating as a rule."

"Nothing to be ashamed of, my dear; he plays a rattling fine game. It would be a good foursome, Paul and I against you two; I fancy you would play well together."

"I'm afraid I'd be very nervous," said Rosie with the same queer little quiver in her voice. Lady Tresham noticed it, though none of the men did, not even the girl's father. She remembered having heard that Willie Ellis was good-looking, and decided silently against that particular foursome.

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CHAPTER XXX

THE ORDEAL OF ALGERON

Gloomy presentiment like a heavy cloud brooded all day over Lady Tresham, while careless Peter sat outside in the sunshine. She was moody and irritable by turns and inclined to be specially snappish with her husband, though she could hardly bear him for a moment out of her sight.

Beck had gone to his room and already begun to undress, when a knock came to the door.

"Well?" he asked, a little impatiently.

He heard Simmons' penetrating whisper outside. "Her ladyship's compliments, and she would be much obliged if you could come to her for a few minutes to her boudoir."

"All right," he answered, getting back into his coat and waistcoat, "tell her I will be with her in a minute or two. It's a nuisance," he muttered to himself as he arranged his collar and tie before the glass. "I guess what she wants with me, and I know I can't do it. She'll have to wait, and she won't like waiting."

Lady Tresham started nervously from her seat as he turned the handle of the door, and stood

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facing him as he entered. The room was a veritable nest of luxury, panelled in pale pink with bright water colours on the wall and a carpet of velvet, deep and soft as moss. All round were a thousand knick-knackeries that women love, and in the midst of them all, a picture of fright and misery, was the beautiful owner. Very beautiful she looked in a pink silk dressing-gown belted at the waist, with the toes of her small embroidered slippers peeping from under the hem. But the soft rosy light that filled the room from a score of pink shaded lamps could not disguise the pallor of her face, nor the bluish rims under her anxious eyes.

"Oh, Paul," she began, abruptly clasping his right hand in both hers, "I'm terribly frightened. Sit down; no, there." She pushed him into a broad-seated chair, the kind one finds in the club smoking-room, only it was upholstered in green velvet instead of brown leather. "You can smoke if you want to, there are cigars and cigarettes. Don't look like that. You're not vexed with me for sending for you?"

"Only too delighted if I can be of the slightest service."

"Oh, please don't be polite and horrid. It's terribly serious." She sat down opposite, leaning well back in her seat, and shaded her face with her hand on her forehead as if the light hurt her eyes. If Beck were a vain man he might have felt flattered at the way her eyes searched his face, but he quite understood.

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"I'm serious too. I'll help you if I can—safely."

She caught at the word "safely." "Then there is danger? To whom?"

"To everybody, to Peter for one, to—but we need not go into that."

"Then you still believe they are after the secret?"

"More than ever. They took precious good care of Peter while he was the one man that knew it. To-morrow two will know it——"

"And then——"

"Goodness knows what then. But if the devil, who is at the head of the business—I have always believed it is a one-man show, the others don't count—if he can coax or frighten the secret out of Algeron he will have no more use for Peter."

"My God!" she gasped out, and for a moment he thought she would faint.

"Oh, no, I don't mean that," he cried, aghast at his own cruelty. "I promise you Peter will come to no harm—if I can help it," he added under his breath.

"I don't trust Algeron, I mean," she added remorsefully; "he is weak and not very brave. There will be no oath to bind him, and even if there was——" The pause was significant. Paul himself did not trust Algeron.

"Why need Peter tell him at all?" she exclaimed impatiently. "Oaths are all nonsense when his life is in question. I wish he would just take the paper and burn it."

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"Have you asked him?"

"A score of times. He just laughed at me, that easy-going laugh he has when he means to have his own way; he is as obstinate as a mule, you might as well talk to the wall. He says your notions are all nonsense, you have got murder on the brain."

"Does he forget everything?" asked Beck, smiling indulgently. "Does he forget what happened to that poor devil of a butler, Gibson, almost before our eyes? Does he forget what a close shave he had himself?"

"Anyway he doesn't mind, if he remembers. He says it is past and gone long ago. It just maddens me the cool way he talks. I left him snoring asleep like a child."

"Children don't snore," said Beck.

"Oh, well, you know what I mean. Neither does Peter snore, for that matter. You are not going to get out of it with that kind of nonsense, you must tell me everything. Have you any plan to catch those scoundrels?"

"That scoundrel," corrected Beck.

"Just as you like. Have you a plan?"

"Well, it can hardly be called a plan. I've a kind of general notion in my head, that's all."

"Do you suspect any one? Oh, I see you do. Tell me, tell me! I'll help you to watch. You must tell me."

Beck shook his head. "I *suspect* no one"—there was an accent on the word suspect—he said slowly.

She searched his face with eager eyes; it was

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imperturbable. If he was lying now, he was lying superbly.

"Oh," she said at last, relaxing her scrutiny with a little sob of disappointment, "I was sure you suspected. I was determined to have it out of you."

"I guessed as much," said Beck, smiling. "I am only playing blind man's buff, waiting to see what luck may throw into my grasp. This much I can tell you, I believe the whole business will be over and ended within a week."

"You will get our friends to help you, Alex and Lord Twickham?"

She looked him suddenly in the eyes, but if she had set a trap for him he was not to be caught.

"Yes," he answered, smiling, "I will get Lord Twickham to help me and Alex. Good-night, keep up your courage. There may be some pleasant surprises in store for you before the week is out;" and without waiting for further questioning he was gone.

The "ordeal of Algeron Trevor" was a very tame business after all. It took just five minutes by the hall clock. After breakfast Algeron, in his tennis whites, went into his father's study and came out five minutes later, master of the great secret. As he came out Lady Tresham went in; she could not bear to have her husband alone for a moment. He greeted her anxious face with a laugh. "The thunderbolt has not fallen yet," he said.

On the other hand, Beck seemed just as deter-

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mined to keep his eye on Algeron. From the top of the stairs he watched him cross the hall and pick up a tennis racquet and a broad-brimmed panama hat from the stand. Then instantly Beck raced up to his room which commanded a view of the tennis court. With a powerful field-glass in his hand and a big Havana between his teeth, he made himself comfortable in an easy-chair for a long wait at the window.

Under a broad beech on the verge of the tennis ground, Rosie sat in a deep wicker chair, a book open on her lap, her thoughts far away. Very charming the young girl looked in a blouse and short skirt of white flannel, with a soft blue tie and no ornament but the thick plaits of her glossy hair that shone like red gold in the bright sun. She did not notice Algeron's coming; even when he tossed a blue serge coat into a chair beside her own she never moved till, stooping with his lips close to her ear, he whispered something that made her start from her seat like one suddenly roused from a dream.

They made a handsome couple as, racquets in hand, they took their places on the court. The boy was dark as the girl was fair, and through the light loose flannels their figures showed with all the slim seductive grace of youth.

From his easy-chair in the window Beck found it pleasant to watch the strenuous game in the sunshine, the light white figures flitting here and there over the vivid green of the sward. Three

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times a vantage game was called before a sharp low service at the inner corner of the court gave the set to the girl.

With fair face flushed and one heavy braid of shining hair undone, she strolled back to her seat. Algeron plumped into a chair beside her and laid his right arm on the back of hers as he talked.

" Oh, I hope not, I hope not; that would spoil everything," muttered Mr. Beck from his window two hundred yards away, as, with glasses glued to his eyes, he watched unwinkingly.

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CHAPTER XXXI

BECK MEETS WITH AN ACCIDENT

MASTER ALGERON seemed very much in earnest about something, and for a while Rosie played with him, laughing at his eagerness. But after a little she grew serious in her turn. Suddenly she sprang to her feet, her cheeks red as a peony, her eyes all alight. She spoke a few words quickly and turned away in the direction of the house. The words were not wanting to tell Beck what it meant, every gesture, every movement of her body were refusal, and he smiled, well pleased. Half-way between the tennis-ground and the house she stopped and sighed, and half-unconsciously a name shaped itself on her lips which the watcher saw and knew as if she had spoken it.

"It's not fair," he muttered and turned the glasses away from her face; "it's worse than eavesdropping, but all the same I'm glad to know how the land lies."

The glasses went back to Algeron, who sat waiting idly, swinging his racquet by the handle. The expression of his face had also changed, he looked relieved to be rid of the girl to whom he

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had been pleading so tenderly a moment before. Something, not in his face, but in his whole attitude, suggested that he was glad to be alone, that he was waiting anxiously, impatiently for some one to appear; nor had he long to wait.

There was the hum of a motor a long way off, stirring the still sultry air, and Lord Twickham's great green car swept up the avenue; he was driving himself alone. With a sharp curve he turned at the door and brought the wheels so close that they grazed the stone steps. But as he ran up the steps to the hall door, out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of Algeron sitting alone by the tennis-ground and went down more quickly than he went up.

If Algeron really expected Lord Twickham his surprise when he saw him was admirably acted. He took no notice of the new-comer till he was close beside him, and he started and jumped to his feet when he spoke. His lordship was plainly excited and impatient, yet he looked round in search of a possible eavesdropper, before he motioned Algeron back to his seat and took the chair beside him. The conversation that followed was brief, but brisk while it lasted; Lord Twickham's pantomime was particularly expressive. He seemed to be asking some question which Algeron refused to answer, and at each refusal Lord Twickham grew more and more impatient. With eye and hand he threatened the other till at last, with a hang-dog look on his handsome young

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face, he stammered out an answer. Even then Lord Twickham's anger did not seem to subside, though he got more control of himself. He was now cautioning the young man, slowly and deliberately, emphasising his remarks with an imperious gesture of his right hand; when at last Algeron nodded his head in sulky acquiescence, he turned abruptly on his heel and walked away. Neither at meeting nor at parting did the two men shake hands.

Apparently the queer comedy was not over yet. Algeron still lounged in the basket-chair where the broad spreading beech cast a cool shadow on the sward, and Beck, with the glass ready to his hand, waited and watched for the third act.

Alex Belton was the next appearance on the stage. Down the wide stone steps he came with a wide straw hat on the back of his head, a cigarette between his lips and a magazine open in his hand, innocently bent on reading in the open air. For a moment it looked as if he would have turned back when he saw Algeron, but he went on in his direction, a word or two passed between them, and Alex sat down, marking his place in the magazine with an old envelope before he dropped it beside him on the grass. The two men conversed for a minute in a careless dilatory fashion with pauses in between.

Twice Alex took up his book, as if to begin to read, and paused to say a few words more. Then the conversation grew more animate; Algeron was doing the talking. A sudden motion of his hand

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told what he was talking about, it was a mimicry of Lord Twickham's threatening gesture; he was telling his friend of the interview just over. Alex listened attentively, dropping in a word now and then. Algeron seemed to end up with an appeal of some sort, and Alex sat silent for a full minute, considering before he answered.

When at last he did answer Algeron's face lit up with relief and delight, and he seemed to thank him effusively. The two clasped hands as they parted. Algeron walked across the lawn and the gravel sweep swinging his racquet jauntily, while Alex sat on in the still sunshine smoking cigarette after cigarette until the gong rang for lunch. When he strolled leisurely across the lawn and the front entrance absorbed him, Beck did some queer things.

First he snapped up the blind of his window till it caught at the top, then he jerked the cord out of it. He knocked over a water-jug and sent a couple of chairs sprawling on the carpet, and, finally, with a long-handled clothes-brush burst a big hole in the window-pane. A splinter of glass grazed the skin of his wrist, and he tied it up carelessly with a white handkerchief so that the blood-stain showed through. Then, with a satisfied glance round at the utter confusion of the room, he picked up a stout walking-stick from the corner and limped out on the passage and down the stairs to the dining-room.

A cry of surprise greeted him as he came in

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slowly, grimacing with pain at every step. The four men jumped to their feet and Rosie ran to help him with a hand under his elbow, until he reached an arm-chair and dropped into it.

"Hallo, Beck," broke out Peter, "what the deuce——"

"It is nothing, nothing," said Beck with a twisted smile. "I behaved like a silly schoolboy. The blind-cord got twisted some way, and I climbed upon a couple of chairs to get it free and took a bad tumble for my pains and broke the window and the furniture."

"Never mind about all that," Lady Tresham interposed quickly; "have you broken yourself?"

"Just sprained my ankle," he said, "that's all. I thought it was nothing at first, but it does smart a bit now."

"Shall I telephone for the doctor?"

"Nonsense, my dear lady, it has happened to me two or three times before; all I want is bandages, cold water and rest, and in a week I'll be about as well as ever."

"Still, a doctor might——"

"I won't have a doctor fingering about me," answered Beck decidedly. "I know what is wrong and what to do about it. Do go on with your lunch, you people, I'm all right. I've no pain when I'm resting this way."

"You must have your lunch too," said Rosie. "There's a small, low table in the study; I know where to get it." And before any one could stop

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her she was out of the room and back again with a little squat round table which she set close to the low chair. Nor would she leave his lunch to the servants, but covered the table herself with the things she thought he liked best.

As her little plump hands were busy at the table Beck caught one and squeezed it gratefully; perhaps he was a little ashamed of his false pretences. "I'll make it up to you for this, Rosie," he said, "see if I don't. I can guess what you want most in the world and I'll get it for you." He looked into her conscious blue eyes as he spoke, and there was something in his look that made her cheeks flush.

"Hallo, Beck," cried Lord Twickham from the far end of the table, "I bar that. You mustn't make love to my daughter, you know."

"Not on my own account," Beck answered, and again Rosie met his eyes and blushed, she hardly knew why.

Lunch was hardly over and the men were lighting their cigarettes when Lady Tresham slipped out of the room. She was back almost immediately, and stood before Beck laughing, with hands stretched out with open palms in an attitude of mock reproach.

"Oh, Paul, Paul," she exclaimed, "you have made an awful mess of your room."

"I'm sorry," he began.

"You needn't be, there is nothing to be sorry for except your poor ankle. But I must put you

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somewhere else until I have the glazier in. Where shall it be? "

"In the haunted room," cried Beck. "I was always dying for a chance to sleep in it."

The "haunted room" was where the two murders had been committed, and had never been used since, though it was the finest bedroom in the house; already the superstition of the servants had peopled it with ghosts. The moment Beck made his choice there was a chorus of protest.

"Don't be a fool, Beck," Twickham said; "that big, gloomy barrack of a room is a rotten place to be laid up in, and no view worth a cent."

"I like the view," said Beck, "and the balcony is a jolly place to limp out on for a smoke."

"You'd be more comfortable in the room next mine," suggested Peter.

"The place hasn't been used for twenty years to my certain knowledge," remonstrated Alex; "you will be sure to catch cold with the damp and all that kind of thing."

"Damp in this weather—nonsense, man," retorted Beck.

"Besides, the ghosts," chimed in Algeron, more than half in earnest. "Walker swore he saw grandfather come out of the room through the locked door the other night."

"I'd give a thousand pounds," laughed Beck—"ten thousand for five minutes' talk with a ghost. Perhaps he will tell me who killed him."

Alex was the most persistent of the lot; he

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appealed to Lady Tresham. "You put him off that silly notion," he said; "tell him he won't be comfortable."

But quite unexpectedly she sided with Beck.

"Of course he can have the room if he wants it, and I'll see that he is comfortable." She had waited at the door while the dispute was on. She went out now and closed it behind her, Rosie following.

The men smoked on in silence, four faint blue curls of smoke went up from their cigarettes. Beck moved and gave a little exclamation of pain.

"You should have a doctor to look after your ankle," said Lord Twickham. "I'll take you up to London if you like."

"Oh, I'm all right," Beck answered a little impatiently, as a man might answer in pain; "all it wants is rest."

"How long do you expect to be laid up?" asked Alex.

"A week or ten days at the outside."

Alex strolled out on the lawn and a moment after Algeron lit a cigarette and followed him. Lord Twickham looked from Beck to Peter as if he wanted to make up his mind to say something and couldn't say it, and at that moment Lady Tresham came back.

"Your room is now ready," she said, "if you care to go to it."

With one heavy hand on the side of his chair Beck stumbled to his feet and swayed as if he

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would have fallen. Both Peter and Lord Twickham made a start together to offer him an arm. He took Peter's, and with his stick in his right hand he limped across the floor after his hostess, Lord Twickham following. It was hard work getting up the stairs, and Lady Tresham's face was full of compassion as she looked back now and again with a cheering word. A servant came out of the bedroom as they reached the door.

"Everything ready, Martha?" Lady Tresham asked.

"Everything, my lady," and all four passed in together.

It was the largest bedroom in the castle, this room where the two savage murders had been committed. On the four-poster bed, with its high pillars of hard, black mahogany, wonderfully carved, a man had been done to death, and after twenty-one years the mystery of his death was still unsolved. The bed stood with its head to the wall and its foot to the two large windows that flooded the room with light. Its curtains were of dark flowered chintz, and from the centre of the canopy an electric light with a pink shade hung over the bed. There was a broad sofa in the room and two great armchairs, one at each window. From this side of the castle the ground sloped away towards the sea, and the windows, which stood wide open, looked out over the woods, with here and there a tall tower of green shooting up from the sloping roof of foliage. Out-of-doors everything was very

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still in the sultry air; not a leaf stirred, and there was no sound but the faint rhythmic murmuring of a pigeon in the woods which seemed to emphasise the silence. The old up-and-down sashes had given place to French windows that opened on a broad iron-work balcony, with a high railing to guard against a sixty-foot fall. There were tables close to the armchair and sofa at either window, and standard electric lamps on each table. The carpet was a deep moss-green and the walls a clear red. Over the chimneypiece of black marble hung a wild seascape by Blake, a storm-beaten ship skirting a lighthouse with a red light on its torn sails. Apart from memories or associations it would be hard to find a pleasanter room for a week's imprisonment.

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CHAPTER XXXII

PETER DISAPPEARS

Beck lay back on his chair, his leg stretched out, and Lady Tresham gently set a sofa cushion under his foot.

"Paining much?" she asked.

"Oh, it's nothing," he answered her quite truthfully. "I feel ashamed to have such a fuss made about it. A few days' rest is all I want."

"I'd dearly like to send for a doctor."

"Please don't; I won't see him if he comes. I can prescribe for myself cold water and bandages, and I'll be quite comfortable."

"Well, I'll send you some rolls of bandages. You won't want water, anyway. There has been a new bath put in the dressing-room, the very latest, hot and cold and shower-spray and everything."

"Shall I help you off with your boot?" asked Peter; "or shall I send my man?"

"Please don't make a fuss; I can manage quite well myself, and I think it is best to have the pressure of the boot until I get the bandages. Be

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off, you fellows, I don't want you bothering about me; it is nothing, I tell you."

"A sprained ankle is no joke," declared Peter.

"Mine is the devil of a good joke," laughed Beck, and stopped with a little grunt of pain.

"Well, I'll look you up again later," said Peter at the door.

"Take care of yourself, old man," added Twickham, and followed his host from the room.

"You will have your dinner here, of course," said Lady Tresham, who was the last to leave. "Oh, Paul," she added in a whisper as the door closed behind the men, "I'm so sorry that this should have happened to you just now. I'm horribly afraid."

"Perhaps it's all for the best," returned Beck with a smile that puzzled her; "you can never tell how things will work out."

The next few hours passed very pleasantly for Beck if it wasn't for the irritating sympathy he received on false pretences. He lay on the sofa, his ankle ostentatiously bandaged, and smoked and read, or talked to the visitors that strolled at frequent intervals in and out during the day.

After dinner Peter had the decanters, cigars and cards carried to the bedroom, and the four men played bridge until bedtime. At a whispered word from Beck, Peter waited on after the others. He looked strangely excited and elated when he passed out an hour later to his own room.

Before breakfast-hour next morning Alex broke

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into Beck's bedroom with an extraordinary bit of news.

"Peter has gone!" he exclaimed.

"Gone!" cried Beck, jumping up in his bed and dropping back with a groan.

"Gone, vanished, leaving no word with any one. He took the motor early in the morning, taking the new chauffeur, and drove off in the direction of the golf links. His wife got uneasy—she seems to be curiously nervous these days—and sent down to know if he was golfing. He wasn't; he just picked up Willie Ellis and was off again without a moment's delay in the direction of London."

"No one knows where he has gone to?"

"No one, if you don't," Alex said abruptly, with a quick question in his eyes. "He was with you a long time after we left last night; I thought he might have told you."

"He told me nothing," said Beck; "but perhaps that new chauffeur—you know what happened before."

Alex thought for a moment. "No, it can't be that," he said slowly, as if arguing the question out with himself. "Why should he stop to pick up young Ellis? You know who young Ellis is. Peter could have got out when the car stopped if he wanted to."

"All the same I think his disappearance is in some way mixed up with the murder mystery."

Again Alex glanced at him keenly. "You

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suspect——?" He broke off in the middle of the sentence.

"I suspect nothing," said Beck dryly. "I just keep my eyes open, that's all. What about Algeron?"

"He knows nothing about it, at least he says nothing. He has been a lot about with Lord Twickham of late."

Beck wrinkled his forehead. "D——n this ankle!" he muttered under his breath. Then out loud: "Has Algeron been told the secret?"

"I don't believe he has; in fact, I'm pretty sure he hasn't, he let out as much to me himself."

"Is he or young Ellis the older?"

"About the same age, I should think. What has that to do with it, anyhow?"

"This much. You told me Ellis was Peter's son; indeed, I could see it without telling. Perhaps Peter has carried him off to tell him the secret."

Alex was plainly struck by a new idea. "By Jove, I believe you are right," he said; "that would account for everything. But we can't tell his wife that, and she is in a desperate state, raving about murder and all sorts of things. She is mad that you should be laid up just at this time."

"Would she like to see me?"

"Rather."

"Then I'll get into my clothes. Oh, I can manage myself, one doesn't dress with one's ankle. I bandaged it last night and watered it this, morning, and I feel a lot better. Will you

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tell Lady Tresham I would like to see her in about twenty minutes?"

"Oh, Paul," she said abruptly, as she came into the room, "they've got hold of him this time, they've murdered him. I'm sure of it." Her cheeks, and even her lips, were ghastly pale, her eyelids were swollen and red with tears. Beck had a sharp twinge of remorse as he looked at her.

"Will you please close the door behind you and lock it?" he said quietly. Mechanically she obeyed him.

"Alex knows nothing," she went on; "he telephoned to Belgrave Square and they know nothing there. Lord Twickham looks nervous and queer when I speak to him. Why aren't you able to do something? I'm sure those wretches have caught him again, and that horrid Ellis boy is an accomplice."

"He isn't, Lady Tresham; you mustn't say that —you, of all people."

She looked at him in amazement; he was smiling at her vehemence.

"How do you know that?"

"Oh, I know more than I can tell at present. Will you take my word for it?—Peter is quite safe and will be back in a day or two with a pleasant surprise for you."

"Why didn't he tell me he was going?"

"Because I asked him not."

"You?"

"There was danger, real danger if he remained

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or if any one knew he was going; you must take my word for that, too. Even now you mustn't tell any one; you mustn't let any one think he is safe."

"Mayn't I tell Rosie? Poor child, she's in a terrible way about it, trying to comfort me all the time. She insists that young Ellis is to be trusted to take care of Peter; she seems to have great confidence in that young Ellis."

"She has great confidence in that young Ellis."

"Why do you say it in that queer way? It is not possible that she——"

"Everything is possible. You'll find harder things to believe later on, but you'll find them true all the same. No, don't ask me any more questions, for I won't answer them. Tell Rosie, if you think she is to be trusted to keep a secret."

"I'd like to tell Alex too, he is horribly worried."

"You mustn't tell Alex, or Twickham, or any one else, and you must keep on looking horribly worried."

"I couldn't manage that, I'm afraid. I will go to my own room and take Rosie with me. When will Peter return?"

"To-morrow, I hope; in a day or two at latest."

She was gone from the room without realising that he had told her nothing. The mystery of her husband's vanishing was just as great a mystery as ever, she had no secret to keep or give away, but she felt infinitely comforted and confident. It was a way Beck had with him. "His word," as the

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Yankees say, "went." Women, especially, trusted him absolutely. Whether he always felt as confident as he made others feel was a question.

Certainly he showed no signs of confidence when, a little later, Alex wandered restlessly into his room and found him close to the window, staring dismally over the tree-tops at the rain which fell silently, ceaselessly.

"Is there anything I could do, Beck?" he asked querulously. "It is just horrible to stand still and do nothing. You can generally puzzle out a mystery. Have you any notion where he is gone to? I might follow him and bring him back."

"Better wait," Beck advised gloomily. "If he has got into trouble it is too late to stop him. If he has gone off of his own accord he will come back of his own accord."

Alex grunted at this prosaic advice. Plainly impatience devoured him; he could not sit still nor stand still for a minute, but walked restlessly about the room, and twice he got out on the balcony, field-glasses in hand, to watch where the London road rose out of the valley a couple of miles away and wound round the hill like the ribbon on a lady's hat.

"That's the way he will come back, I suppose, if he comes at all?"

"If he comes at all," echoed Beck. There was nothing left of the confidence with which he had spoken to Lady Tresham.

There was silence for a few minutes. Alex still

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loitered on the balcony of the window furthest from where Beck sprawled over the armchair, his bandaged ankle stretched out before him.

"I say, Beck," he called out over his shoulder.

"Well?"

"Do you think you could manage to get down to the golf links? You might pick up some hints. We could make the ankle comfortable in the motor."

"I'd be afraid," Beck answered ingloriously. "I'm a horrible coward about pain. Besides," he added, plainly as an afterthought, "it would be no use, I'm sure. Come in!"

Lord Twickham came in and Alex stepped back out of the balcony into the room.

"Hallo, Alex. Didn't expect to see you here. I thought you told me you were going back to London to-day? How is the ankle, Beck? This is a bad business about Peter."

His manner was jerky and excitable. He asked questions without waiting for answers. "I've just come back from the golf links," he went on; "no news of any kind there." Beck looked "I told you so" at Alex.

"That woman, what's her name, Ellis, says the car drove up to the clubhouse and Peter called for Willie through the open door. He never looked at her or spoke to her, though she was standing quite close. When Willie came he told him to get into the car, he had something to say to him, and they drove off without another word. Peter looked pale and excited, that's all she could tell me."

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By this time he was standing out on the balcony which Alex had just left, and his last words were spoken with his back to the room.

"I'll go up to London," said Alex suddenly, "to see if I can pick up some clues. Sure you can't come, Beck? Well, I suppose not, but it's a pity. I'll telephone if I have any news."

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CHAPTER XXXIII

"THE GAME IS UP!"

LORD TWICKHAM blundered back from the balcony into the room as Alex left. "Look here, Beck," he said awkwardly, "I'm afraid there is something wrong."

"That appears plain enough," retorted Beck.

"I mean that Alex knows more than he lets on. Can it be some game between himself and Peter?"

"I don't think so."

"Or the young cub, Algeron," Twickham broke out explosively. "He's a fine specimen of a young gentleman! He keeps a play-acting girl in London while he has the impudence to make love to Rosie. I gave him a bit of my mind about it yesterday."

"I saw you. On the tennis-court, wasn't it?"

Lord Twickham couldn't quite guess how much Beck saw of that bit of his mind.

"I suppose Peter told him the secret," he went on in a milder tone.

"I suppose so."

"It's a pity; too big a thing for such a chap as that. I saw one of the rubies that Peter keeps in the safe, and it's as fine a thing as there is, and

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I flatter myself I'm a bit of a judge. It dazzles one to think what might be done in that way if anything happened to poor Peter. That young cub would be an easy find, any one could coax the secret out of him, and then——"

In his excitement his lordship was growing incoherent, the madness of the jewel collector was on him. Beck looked at him straight in the eyes, and he stopped suddenly.

"That was not what I came to talk to you about," he stammered.

"I don't suppose it was."

"I'm desperately uneasy about Peter."

"Of course, I can understand that."

"It's such a pity that you are not able to be up and about."

"Well, that can't be helped, can it?"

Beck's tone was not inviting; his chill sentences killed conversation, but Lord Twickham seemed to have a difficulty in getting himself out of the room. He walked up and down a couple of times before he found himself at the door.

"Well, I'm off," he said at last; "hope you'll soon be on your feet again."

"Hope so," said Beck from his chair; "take care of yourself."

The door had no sooner closed behind Lord Twickham than Beck was on his feet again, active as a cat. First he stepped lightly to the door and locked it, and then was out on the balcony which his lordship had just left. The rain had ceased

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and the blue of the sky was breaking out in vivid patches through the clouds, the sun slanted brilliantly on the wet slope of a distant hill, the woods that stretched away under his eyes were full of song.

But Beck had eyes only for the balcony itself, searching the railings and the iron network of the floor with the keenest scrutiny. With the self-satisfied smile of a man who is mentally patting himself on the back he found what he expected to find. From the open iron network at his feet stretched down a little line of black thread. When he got on his knees to examine it with a magnifying-glass he found that it was silk thread, very fine and very strong, and that it stretched in two parallel lines a long way down, he could not see the ends, but as far as he could judge right down to the ground. Without touching the thread Beck jumped to his feet.

"To-night, I should fancy," he said with the same quiet, self-satisfied smile. He brushed the dust from his knees, went silently across the thick carpet to unlock the door and sat down with renewed enjoyment to his book.

It was a faculty he prided himself on—that he could put an impending danger, whatever its nature, clear out of his mind till the time came to meet it. His book absorbed him, a powerful story, *The New Macheaville*, by Wells. But he smiled now and again at the wonderful jumble of turgid thoughts, at the vivid phrases and at the

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sordid, futile, unconvincing hero whose self-appointed mission was to reorganise civilisation. Beck had no use for vague generalities. His notion of life was to do the work his hands found to do.

In that well-ordered household the meals arrived with automatic regularity. The butler, Walker himself, the hero of the frustrated burglary, waited on him at dinner and gossiped about his lordship's disappearance.

"Her ladyship," he said, "was still in her own room with Lady Rosie; there is no news of his lordship, but Mr. Belton has gone up to London. Lord Twickham has gone off with the young master in the direction of the golf links; his lordship told me they would have dinner together, at half-past eight, in about half-an-hour's time." Walker glanced at a bulbous gold watch. "Shall I bring coffee and a liqueur, sir?"

No, Beck did not want the coffee; yes, he might leave the port. That was all, nothing more to-night, thank you, and Walker slid noiselessly out of the room.

Though the afterglow of the sunset was still in the room, Beck took off his coat and collar and flung himself on the bed. He could sleep when he wanted to, and later on he meant to be particularly wide awake. He set his consciousness like an alarm clock for eleven, and five minutes after he had coiled himself up cosily in the eiderdown quilt and was fast asleep.

At eleven he started up, wide awake, and the

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same motion carried him out of bed. There was still light enough to see the outline of the furniture against the fainter darkness of the room. In his stockinged feet Beck walked to the window, where the cool air blew softly into the room, and listened. All was wonderfully still in the house and the world outside.

As he listened with strained attention out of the silence minute sounds came to his ear, the swish of the wing of a bat that was circling outside in the darkness, the rustling of a weasel that crept through the grass at the wood's edge, and far off and faint the throb of a motor on the London road.

Silently he subsided into the big chair by the window and waited and watched, all his life in his ears. In the rigid figure and set face there was plain, if there were any one to see, the tension of a fierce excitement. Once he got up and walked across the carpet and set the bath-room door ajar, counting the steps to and from the door to the window and lifting a chair out of the way. For a moment he stood behind the curtain of the bed and made sure that he was completely concealed by the heavy folds, then he dropped back into his chair and waited. In his left hand he fondled a bottle with a glass stopper, and he shifted a big silk handkerchief from the right to the left hand pocket of his coat.

After that, for more than an hour he sat motionless as a statue, with ears strained to catch the faintest sound in the silence.

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The touch of a stealthy footstep on the lawn outside came to him through the still air, and in an instant the statue was alive. Across the room he went like a cat and touched on the electric light in the bath-room. For a second he paused and closed the door behind him, his finger on the key. "I'll risk it," he muttered, and left the door unfastened, the key in the lock. Then, like a shadow, he was back across the room and hidden in the folds of the heavy window curtain, listening.

Like a man in a theatre with the book of the play in his hand, he knew beforehand the sounds he should hear. The stealthy footsteps came close under his window, and presently there was the faint swish of a rope as it slid up slowly and softly, drawn by the black silk, through the network floor of the balcony.

Behind the curtain Beck crouched motionless, every nerve and muscle tense as a tiger about to spring.

Slowly steps mounted a rope ladder and a hand touched the railing of the balcony. Beck heard it touch. A man lifted himself over the balcony and stole into the darkness of the room. He carried a small, electric lantern which made a little pathway through the blackness, stretching from the window to the bed. Slowly, slowly, pausing at every step, the figure crept along the pathway of light.

From his hiding-place Beck could see that the face was masked and that there was a naked

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weapon, a thin streak of brightness, in the right hand. Then the right hand was raised with the weapon point downwards over the bed.

The man started back with an exclamation of surprise stifled in his throat, when he found the bed empty. All round the room he flashed the electric light, like the dazzle from a moving looking-glass in the sunshine. So for a moment the tense figure stood, then the tinkle of water in the closed bath-room came to his ears with the plain suggestion that Beck was inside, "watering his ankle," and straight across the room he stole to the bath-room door. Hesitating, he stood with his hand on the key, as Beck had stood a little while before, seemingly undecided if he should open or lock the door. Beck's head came from behind the curtain, and his right hand held the revolver ready.

He drew a soft breath of relief and his head went back into its hiding-place when the masked man turned the key in the lock and re-crossed the room towards the bed. For a second he paused to sniff the faint smell of chloroform in the air, some lotion for the sprained ankle he must have thought, for, with a glance at the bath-room door, he stole on quicker than before to the big four-poster.

The narrow ray of electric light searched the elaborate carving on the right-hand pillar of the bed, then, shifting the thin stiletto to his left hand, the burglar laid his right upon a rose carved in black mahogany and twisted it. Round

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and round it went on a screw till it came out in his hand, and from the recess behind it he picked a sheet of tightly-folded parchment. His first notion was to thrust it hastily into his pocket, never for a second doubting that he had found the thing he sought for. The parchment was half-way to his pocket when he changed his mind, drew it out and unfolded it to read. Under the vivid light of the electric lamp, in big sprawling black letters, the words leaped to his eyes—

"The game is up!"

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CHAPTER XXXIV

A CANDID SCOUNDREL

A SUDDEN fierce spasm of rage robbed him for a moment of thought or action; the lantern dropped from his hand and rolled on the floor, scattering splashes of light. In that moment, swift and silent, with the unrestrained savagery of a wild beast, Beck was upon him. Gripping his left hand by the wrist, he wrenched it round with a vicious twist that wrung a sharp cry of pain from the victim, while the dagger dropped from his nerveless fingers on the carpet.

There was no struggle, no pretence of a struggle, one might as well have tried to struggle with a thunderbolt. With a sudden jerk Beck had his man spread-eagled on the carpet, his knee on his chest, while he crammed a thick silk handkerchief, saturated with chloroform, against his lips and nostrils. A few convulsive gasps and heavings and the body lay limp and motionless.

Beck leaped to his feet and tore off the black mask from the face, snapping the elastic band that held it in place, and looked down on the ghastly grey face of Alex Belton.

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" What a devil," he muttered, his fingers on the pulse; " what a clever, pleasant, pitiless, poisonous devil, and what a surprise this will be to every one who knew him, except myself."

He lifted the body, which lay in his arms like a half-empty sack, on to the bed, where the victim of that man's cruelty and greed had already died in agony, and there bound his hands and feet. From the balcony Beck cut loose the rope-ladder, which flopped on the lawn below, and for a little while he sat at the open window, the silence and the soft night air cooling his excitement. Then he closed and fastened it and stretched himself tentatively in the big chair, got up again and fitted a cushion at a comfortable angle under the side of his head and in a minute was fast asleep.

" Beck," called a feeble voice from the bed an hour later, " are you there? "

Feeble as the voice was, its faint vibration passed straight through Beck's ear to the slumbering brain. He started up, wide awake, touched the electric switch and filled the room with light.

Alex lay on the bed, stark as a mummy, his face was still very pale, with a black streak of blood stretching from his nose to his chin. But his lips were twisted into a queer crooked smile, and there was something like laughter in the eyes he turned on Beck when he sat down at the bedside.

Beck wiped the blood from his face, twice dipping the towel in the basin.

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"Thanks, old man," said Alex, in the old way with the same mocking light in his eyes. "Sit down, I've a lot to say to you. You've guessed this for a long time, I suppose?"

"I guessed it almost from the first, but for a long time I was quite sure, though I had no proof. No one would have believed me, so I waited to catch you out."

"What an ass I was!" cried Alex with a quick knitting of brows; "what a confounded ass not to put you out of the way!"

"It wouldn't have been so easy, I was on my guard."

"Oh, I could have managed right enough, I had a hundred chances if I had had the sense to take them. But I had a kind of liking for you, that's the truth; besides, the game was more exciting with you in it. I thought I had you safe under my own eye."

He spoke to Beck of his own murder quite pleasantly, and Beck answered in the same spirit. "You meant to do for me this time?"

"If necessary, but I thought I had locked you in the bath-room. That was a neat notion of yours, to set the tap running. But, I say, we're wasting time, old man. You have got me hard and tight; I don't pretend to be the least bit repentant, for I'm not, nor afraid, for I'm not. I've had a jolly good time of it and lots of money and fun and excitement—if I could only have

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laid hold of the old devil's formula. I suppose you have it. By the way, how did you find it? did Peter let the secret out? "

"Not likely; I saw young Algeron tell you."

"Saw? "

"Yes, the deaf-and-dumb dodge, lip-reading; you've heard of it, of course. I picked it up when I was at Chelmsworth's place twenty-one years ago; you remember? "

"D——n you! " cried Alex with a sudden gust of passion, and for a second there was murder in his eyes, but it passed off and left him calm again. "Rotten low trick, Beck, I call it," he said mockingly; "eavesdropping, spying on your best friends; I never suspected you of that. It's a jolly good job for you I didn't. Of course it was you sent Peter and his boy off in the motor? "

"I didn't want to have them here with you and Walker after you had got hold of the secret."

"You guessed about Walker too? "

"I knew about Walker."

"You are a d——d smart chap, Beck; I don't want to flatter you, but you are. Still, we're wandering from the point; that's not what I want to talk about. I suppose you mean to hang me if you can get evidence enough; in any case you can get me penal servitude for burglary, and I'd sooner, on the whole, be hanged. As I have told you, I am neither sorry nor ashamed. Whatever fools say about it, there is no other life but this; naturally

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I made the best of it. I'll be as well off, when I come to die, as the greatest fool of a saint that ever tried to save the immortal soul he hasn't got by doing good to others, and having a bad time himself. I don't care a curse what people say or think of me when I'm not here, when, in fact, I am nowhere. Of course, you know that Algeron is my son. It was a neat trick, that, changing him for the other and getting the nurse out of the way. You didn't believe the story about Peter and Mrs. Ellis? "

"Of course not."

"I thought you did; I was a fool every way. I kept Peter's son on hand in case Algeron was restive, he could easily be put out of the way later."

"With Peter," said Beck; "that's why I sent them off together."

"Peter knows, of course. I was a fool not to get rid of the boy as a baby; he was a lot of trouble, and I knew it was very dangerous when I saw you watching him. I might have kept him out of the way, but that fool of a woman would insist on being near Algeron and myself. The cursed cub of Peter's was never wanted at all afterwards; Algeron was all right, I had no trouble with him."

There was for the first time a curious softening in face and voice as he spoke of Algeron. "I believe he liked me for myself and wanted to please me the moment he knew I was his father. But the

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queerest thing of all was that I was fond of him. Just animal instinct, I suppose, as a beast is fond of its young. I had never cared a curse for a human being in my life before, not a curse for his mother beyond the passing pleasure she gave me, but I was fond of the boy. He made love to the Twickham girl just to please me, but he had a girl of his own in London, a little dancing and singing chit of a girl whom he was real fond of, and in the long run I told him he might marry her if he wanted to."

"I saw you," said Beck.

"Now I'm coming to the point. I suppose you would like a signed confession about Algeron and Willie Ellis and the rest of it? It would save a lot of trouble."

Beck nodded.

"I thought so. Well, you can get it on certain terms. I have left Algeron all I have, and I want you to let him have it; you could never give it all back to the original owners. It's not worth your while hunting up the fellows that worked under me, they don't count when I'm gone, but you may hang the lot of them if you like and can, for all I care, only you must let Algeron off; he will marry his girl and leave the country."

He laughed a queer puzzled little laugh.

"'Pon my soul I can't understand myself in the least, or why I care a d——n one way or the other. In a short time I will be clear out of it, out of everything, just as if I never was, and it won't

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matter to me in the least what happens to Algeron. But there it is. Do you agree? "

Again Beck nodded.

" All right, I'll take your word for it. Write what you like and I'll sign it."

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CHAPTER XXXV

A WAY OUT

THE dawn had come while they talked together. As Beck sat by the table, writing, he looked out over the wide and lovely landscape that lay very still and silent waiting the advent of the day. A thin line of fiery red showed of a sudden behind the distant hill, the wood on its top was lit up as from within, and the sleepy chirping of birds was heard.

Beck paused with his pen's point on the paper; his thoughts were with the wretched man who was about to sign his own death-warrant and go out of all the light and warmth and reality of the world into the bleak unknown. In spite of himself a sharp pang of pity gripped his heart for a moment. Then he began to write rapidly.

"You've tied those cords so damnably tight," said Alex, wriggling on the bed, "that I can't move hand or foot. That's better," as Beck propped him up on pillows that he might read what was written.

"You have got me down for five murders—the three Trevors, Gibson and the nurse. I see you don't bring Susan Ellis into the story; she was

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there, you know; in fact, I may say she helped to do for the nurse. Well, if you're satisfied I am, but you must loosen my right hand if I'm to sign."

"I want witnesses," Beck said.

"The more the merrier, so far as I am concerned."

Beck touched the bell.

"Did you ring, sir?" said Walker at the door. Then he caught sight of Alex lying like a trussed fowl on the bed, and a swift change came into his face. His eyes shone like a wild beast at bay; frightened and furious, they glanced sidelong from Beck and went round the room furtively in search of a weapon.

Alex laughed. "It's all right, Walker," he called out from the bed; "I mean it is all wrong, but there is no help for it. I'm held at last and you've just got to do what Mr. Beck tells you."

"Yes, sir." With a convulsive effort he relapsed into the servant, but his underlip quivered as he turned to Beck for orders.

"Has Lord Tresham come back yet?" Beck asked.

"Half an hour ago, sir, with the young man. They went straight to her ladyship's room; five minutes ago they sent for Lady Rosie."

"And Lord Twickham?"

"He is in the breakfast-room with the young master."

"We don't want Algeron here," broke out Alex; "don't bring him here, Beck."

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"All right," Beck answered; "we won't have him here, Walker. You will kindly tell the others, all the others," he ticked them off forefinger on forefinger, "Lord and Lady Tresham, Lord Twickham, Lady Rosie and the other young man, that I want to see them here at once on important business."

"Yes, sir," said Walker, but he looked to Alex for orders.

"It's all right," said Alex again. "Do what you're told, then you may scoot. That's all right too, Beck, isn't it? You don't want to hold the poor devil, it's not worth your while. And look here, Walker, you had better try and run straight from this out, you have not the brains to keep out of trouble."

"Yes, sir," said Walker, and was gone.

Alex laughed a quick short bark of a laugh. "'Pon my soul, that comes well from me," he cried; "to lecture the poor devil. A very pretty skull full of brains I have to keep me out of trouble. I forgot for the moment you had me so tight by the heels. Hallo, Peter, this is a surprise," as Lord Tresham came into the room, Lady Tresham a little behind him, a dazed look on her gentle face.

It was the woman that answered: "Oh, Alex, this is awful!" There was something like pity in her voice; her husband had told her, but her mind refused to grasp the whole terrible truth. It wasn't that she had any doubts about the truth

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of the story, but she could not get her mind clear of the tangle of old associations. The bound man was two distinct people to her, her old friend Alex Belton and the cold-blooded murderer who had stolen her child, and had attempted the life of her husband; perhaps it heightened her illusion that he met her with the familiar smiling face of the old days, without the faintest touch of embarrassment.

"Isn't it, Lady Tresham?" he answered heartily—"specially horrible for me; but there is no sense whining over that now, is there? I'm glad to see that the young people take to each other so kindly. I suppose Algeron is completely cut out already by the newcomer?"

"Oh, but how could you be so cruel, how could you!"

"Every man for himself," he answered, still smiling, "and the devil for us all. It's the way of the world; believe me, it is."

"You infernal scoundrel," Lord Twickham burst out in a white heat of wrath, "it was you robbed my house, it was you killed my wife, you devil out of hell!"

The man was pale with rage, his features contorted, the sweat came out in little beads on his forehead, his black eyes looked murder. He came just one step towards the bed, his fingers twitching when Beck came between.

"Easy does it," he said, his grip strong on

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Lord Twickham's arm. "You can leave him to the hangman."

"By God, I'll watch him hanging."

"Will you?" There was a sudden change in Alex's face as he snarled the words; for a second, for less than a second, the devil in the man glowed in his face, in the lifted lip that showed the white teeth, in the savage light of his eyes. Then, almost before they saw it, it was gone and he was his smiling self again.

"That paper, Beck," he said quietly, ignoring the furious Lord Twickham, "I suppose we had better get it done with. Do you want to read it out to those people?"

"They know already."

"So much the better; it saves trouble, doesn't it? Well, I'm ready if you are."

From the table near the window Beck carried the written confession, with pen and ink, on a large blotting-pad, to the bed. Lord Twickham watched with relentless hatred in his eyes as an Indian brave might watch his enemy at the stake. The others stood away. Even Beck was conscious of an unreasoning pity for the man about to consign himself to a shameful death. Then he remembered the men whom Alex had pitilessly tortured and slain in that same room where he himself now lay.

The man, to do him justice, claimed no pity. He laughed as Beck set the blotter before him,

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lifted his bound hands and let them drop back heavily on the bed.

"Give me a chance," he said; "you are not afraid."

Beck, with the dagger that had been meant for his own heart, cut the cords, leaving the hands and arms free to the elbow. With a movement so quick the eye could scarcely follow it, Alex's right hand and his left touched for a second; his fingers went swiftly to his lips and there was a motion of swallowing in his throat. On the third finger of his left hand the large bloodstone of his ring stood open on a hinge. With savage triumph in his face, he looked up from the bed straight into the eyes that bent over him.

"I guessed as much," said Beck, so softly that no one else in the room heard. "How long?"

"Five minutes. Give me the pen."

He signed with a flourish, then wrote with a steady hand; squeezing the words small between his signature and the bottom of the page—

"I, Alexander Belton, poisoned myself with a globule of Cynanide of Potassium which I had concealed in my ring for such an emergency. Finis."

As the last word was written his face flushed purple, the breath gurgled in his throat, fierce convulsions shook him, and he dropped back motionless. Beck, looking up, met Lady Tresham's eyes.

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"He is dead," he said softly; "he has poisoned himself."

"Lord, have mercy on his soul!" prayed the gentle woman whom he had wronged so cruelly.

Instinctively the group drew away from the bed, where death lay, to the open window through which entered the cool freshness of morning. Peter Lord Tresham drew a great draught of the freshness into his lungs.

"It feels like waking from a nightmare," he said.

Between the two women stood the newly-found heir. The mother's gaze was steady on his face, searching it lovingly; the girl's eyes were on the ground, but they lifted now and again with a quick shy look, her cheeks were flushed and the lace on her bosom rose and fell with quick breathing.

From his breast pocket Beck took a folded sheet of parchment tied with a narrow red ribbon, sealed with a small red seal.

"This is yours," he said; "the ruby formula," and he handed it to the boy.

All eyes were on him as he took it. The mother laid her hand on his shoulder—somehow there seemed to be entreaty in the gesture—the girl for the first time looked him in the face.

For a moment he held the precious formula in his hand, the key to an incalculable treasure, for which men had plotted, tortured and murdered. He looked a question at his father, who nodded approval. Then with a sudden movement of his

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strong fingers he rent the unread parchment from end to end. Again and again he tore along and across till the bits were no bigger than a sixpence, and tossed the handful out through the open window to be caught and scattered in the freshening wind.

THE END

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